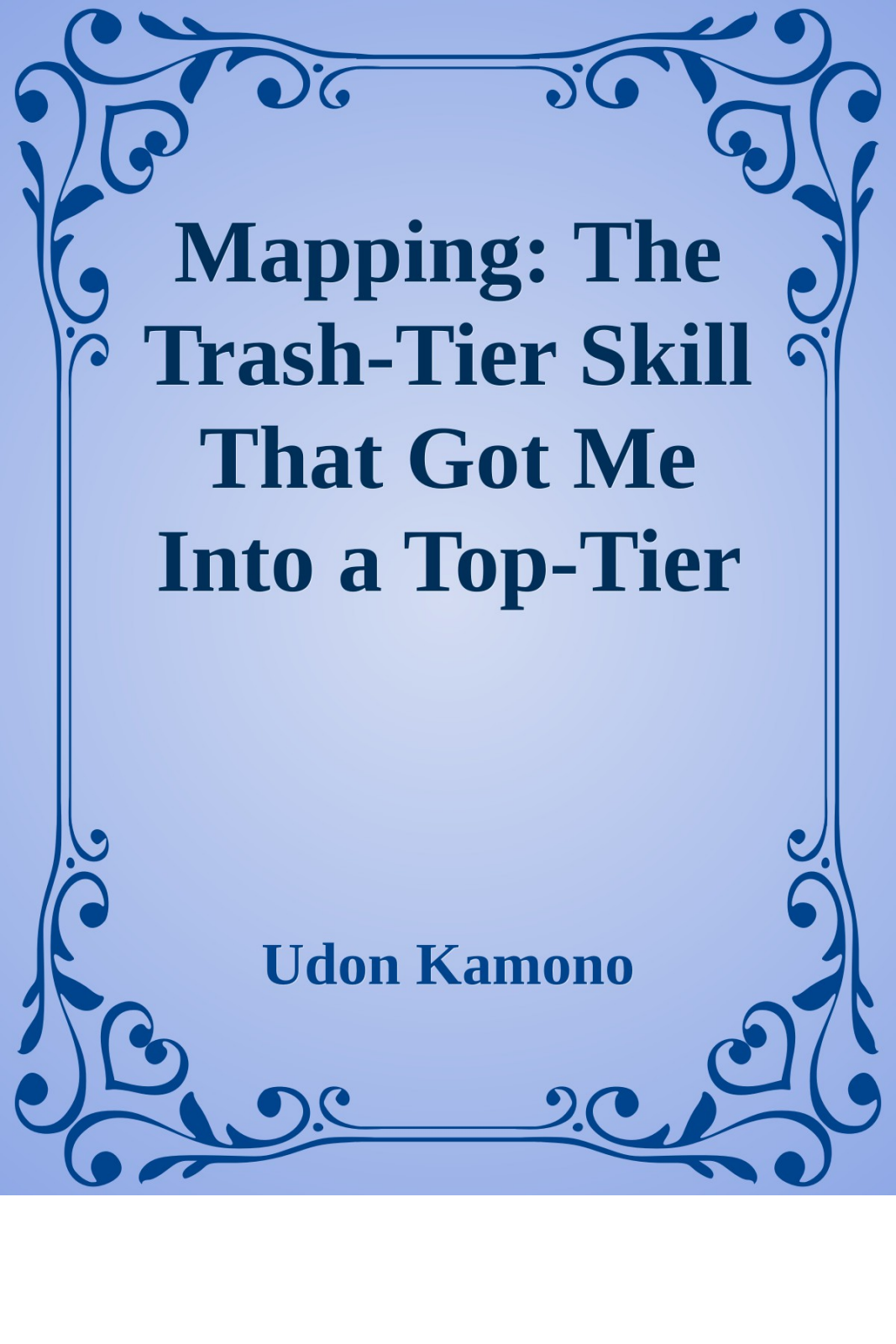


A decorative blue floral border with intricate scrollwork and leaf patterns frames the entire page. The border is composed of four corner pieces and four side pieces, all rendered in a dark blue color against a light blue background.

Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier

Udon Kamono

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Epilogue & Prologue

If only we'd been satisfied with that...

After clearing floor 20, fending off the Headhunter, and restoring the peace of our everyday lives, we should have been satisfied. We should've called it all there—the Arrivers, dungeon diving, adventuring, everything. If we had, we could've continued to live out our happiness.

But we chose wrong, and no amount of regret could ever turn back the clock on the biggest mistake of our lives.

None of us realized how arrogant we were. We overestimated ourselves. We believed we would never fail. That we could conquer any wall that stood in our way, someday, together.

Yet life is cruel to us all in equal measure. There is no such thing as eternal happiness. Misfortune mercilessly befalls everyone eventually.

It was just our turn.

We dreamed beyond our means, and we were punished severely for reaching beyond our limits. I wished over and over and over again to rewind time... But such unreasonable wishes always go unanswered.

If there really was a god in this world, could they even do such a thing? Or was it impossible even for them?

I don't know, and I might never. But if I had one chance, a single opportunity to go back, I would tell my past self one thing...

Never go to floor 21.

Floor 21

Fame, fortune, magic, wisdom... Endless treasure and bounty lay within the otherworldly depths of the land—depths yet to be conquered that beckon people with the intangible power of curiosity. Be it in the name of hopes and dreams or greed and self-interest, adventurers from all walks of life risked everything to challenge the dungeons.

One of many daring groups was the Arrivers, who held the remarkable claim of being the closest to actually clearing a dungeon. They also happened to be the party that took me in... and we were currently in the middle of a strategy meeting concerning how to achieve our next goal: conquering floor 21.

The one heading the discussion was our party mediator, Jin. He was the eldest of the group and had a naturally calm, mature personality.

“So, what shall we do?” he asked. “We called this strategy meeting, but we don’t have much information on floor 21. We poked around briefly, but there doesn’t seem to be anything special about the floor itself.”

More specifically, we’d taken a cursory ten-minute survey of the place after clearing floor 20 the other day. I could summarize my thoughts on the place in two words: a letdown.

People called floor 21 onward “the end floors.” They were said to be on a completely different level from all the previous floors, but we hadn’t detected any notable monsters or environmental gimmicks once we actually got there.

In terms of appearance, floor 21 bore the closest resemblance to floor 20. It was more ruins, but the vibe was different. If floor 20 consisted of ruins long forgotten by time, then floor 21 was the skeleton of a shady temple to some demon. The whole place—floor, walls, pillars, and all—was pitch black with a design resembling a monster’s face here and there. There were also demonic statues dotted around.

And if I’m being totally honest, after exploring floors with volcanoes, snowy mountains, floating islands, and flying fish... it was just underwhelming. We’d been seeing demon mobs since floor 1, too. That’s why I wasn’t particularly impressed...

But floor 21 had made a rather powerful impression on Neme, our

party's priestess. She was a small dwarf who, in spite of her real age, was childish in almost every way—right down to her fear of monsters and the like.

"What do you mean there's nothing special about it?! It looked like an evil spirit might jump out at us at any moment! It was terrifying!"

"That's not quite what I meant..."

"Then what *did* you mean?! Weren't you scared, Jin?!"

"Well, no, I wasn't."

Jin scratched his cheek, unsure how to react to her raving. I'd thought the rest of us were all on the same page here, but it turned out that Neme had some unlikely support...

"I wasn't exactly scared, but I certainly didn't like it," Roslia said, much to everyone's surprise. "There was something stale about the air, you know? Like staying there for too long would make you feel sick."

That almost sounded funny coming from a woman who'd destroyed countless parties with her good looks and wiles. She normally carried herself like a delicate maiden, but she was acting pretty resolute right now. Had she really felt something after all? I opened my mouth to ask, but Force cut in before me...

"All right, let's abandon the floor 21 plan then," he swiftly suggested.

"C'mon, dude," I groaned.

He was a real pushover when it came to Roslia, or any cute girl for that matter. I sighed in spite of myself. I still had a hard time swallowing the fact that he was our leader. He was such a sucker that he'd once left the party to run off with his "soulmate"—that's just the kind of guy Force Granz was.

"We're not abandoning anything. But what do you think? Did you feel anything, Erin?" Jin asked as he turned to our party mage.

"Not a thing," she replied, glaring daggers at Roslia like usual. "The vixen here is just trying to make herself look like some innocent thing that needs protecting."

"I am not! What a terrible thing to say. Hic... Note, Erin's bullying me again."

"See?! That's what I'm talking about! Hey, let go of Note!"

"It may look like I'm clinging to Note, but *he's* actually the one clinging to *me*—"

"Nope. Cut it out already. We're getting nowhere like this," I finally interjected.

"Well, if you insist," Roslia whined, backing away reluctantly. "But what else is there to discuss, really?"

She had a point there. We'd made the time for this meeting, but there was barely anything to talk about. That was just how little

information we had on floor 21. Granted, our strategy meetings normally deteriorated in this fashion...

“Let’s move on to discussing what we’re having for dinner, then!” Roslia soon suggested.

“Seconded!” shouted Force.

“Add one vote from Neme!” the party priestess chimed in.

“I was actually wondering what to make tonight, so that sounds good to me,” even Erin agreed.

“I say we have a whole roast pig!” Roslia continued.

“Could you at least ask for something easier to cook?”

“How about a whole simmered sea serpent, then?”

— “Yes, exactly. Something quick and easy like simmered sea serpent — Wait, is that even a real dish?! You just made that up!”

“Whoa, way to overreact, Erin.”

“You shut up, Force! I’m already embarrassed, so you don’t need to rub it in!”

“Neme gives it 46 points!”

“Don’t go giving people scores for over-the-top reactions! Much less bad ones!”

And so things devolved into the usual banter and chatter. I glanced over at Jin to make sure he was okay with this...

“I personally thought it was pretty good, Erin.”

“Now’s not the time for your gentle encouragement, either!”

Ah, he’d gotten swept up in things too.

*

The glow of the warp crystal receded, and we found ourselves in a vast, gloomy room.

Floor 21... This is the official start of the end floors. Territory no living adventurer has ever set foot in.

All we could see from here were rows of towering pillars. There was no discernible ceiling, as if the pillars stretched up into the dark heavens above. The sky radiated the faint, eerie glow of a purple sun. Visibility wasn’t great, but we could still make out everything within several meters.

The strangely colored light hurt my eyes a little. It was as if there was a thin film in the air that dampened my vision. The floor was jet black and glossy like marble. Every step we took on it echoed through our otherwise silent surroundings.

“For now, let’s follow the route we took while scouting things. We didn’t make it very far, but it’s still a start.”

As the party navigator, it was my job to decide the path we took. Thanks to Mapping, I still had everything we’d explored last time (plus the kilometer radius around it) in my head.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Jin, the overseer of all party decisions, agreed.

Thus began our expedition on floor 21.

We were currently surrounded by three black gargoyles.

Just moments ago, the bronze statues alongside the path had sprung to life and bared their fangs at us. Without hesitation, Jin engaged the gargoyle in front of him. He thrust at it multiple times with his black dagger, but each strike bounced off the monster’s upper arm with only a light scratch to show for it. It seemed these things were much tougher than they appeared to be.

Roslia looked around before using Beacon to attract the second gargoyle’s attention. Force then rushed the last one. Erin and Neme took cover between our three frontline fighters in relative safety. There weren’t any other monster presences nearby, although the gargoyles did have us surrounded. Rather than trying to run, fighting was our best option.

That meant my job would be handling one of the gargoyles so one of our frontline fighters could tag out and focus their firepower elsewhere. The question was who... Given the situation, I decided I should relieve Force since he was the only one without any aggro management arts. I activated Bloodlust, directing it at the gargoyle he was fighting to get its attention.

When I did, Neme cast her Regeneration spell. That allowed me to use Pseudo Shadow Runner, which I promptly engaged before rushing past Force in a burst of speed. I slipped right past the gargoyle too as it locked eyes on me.

It lashed out with three successive thrusts, all of which I evaded just by moving my upper body. I then stooped forward and sensed its pitchfork sail over my back. Springing with my right leg, I activated Withdraw twice to get some distance before using my left leg to leap to the side with one last Withdraw. Not a second later, the spot where I’d just been standing was swept with black flame—a breath attack from the gargoyle.

With less than a second to spare, I glanced to the side to confirm Force’s position.

Good. He’s going to help Jin.

He must have determined I could handle the gargoyle on my own. That meant this was up to me.

Magic was now coalescing at the tip of the gargoyle’s pitchfork. The air crackled as lightning came hurtling toward me. I made a beeline for the first pillar I spotted and used Climb to run up it in hopes of shaking the bolt pursuing me.

No luck. It was closing in fast. I guess it was impossible to outrun

lightning while I was fighting gravity. So be it. I'd anticipated as much.

I waited until the last possible second before the bolt struck and kicked off the pillar with both feet. I sailed through the air in an arc, landing with the support of my hands and rolling to break the fall. It worked like a charm, but there was an odd sensation in my right hand. I guess I'd broken more than just my fall...

But by the time the gargoyle poked at me two or three more times with its pitchfork, the sensation was gone. I continued to evade its furious flurry of attacks for several more seconds... and then faint alarm bells started going off in the back of my head. It was like my body was creaking more than usual.

What? Is this recoil from Pseudo Shadow Runner? No, it can't be. Neme's Regenerate Plus is more than enough to override—

That was when it hit me. Neme's Regenerate Plus wasn't working like normal. It was less effective somehow. I should've realized it sooner, too. The pain I'd felt in my wrist earlier would have ordinarily been gone in an instant.

Curious, I looked over at Force. If my theory was correct, he should be hurting more than usual from his cursed sword. And maybe it was just confirmation bias... but it sure looked like the black flames eating at his body were more vicious than normal.

As I shifted my gaze back to the enemy in front of me, Roslia caught my eye. She was in danger. Her barrier, Impenetrable Fortress, had just been broken through by a lightning-coated pitchfork. Thankfully, Erin was quick on her feet. She fired an attack spell for cover, forcing the gargoyle to leap away. Crisis averted, but that had still been way too close for comfort.

Impenetrable Fortress was the strongest defense spell a paladin could learn. There was no doubt in my mind that the monsters on floor 21 were strong... but they shouldn't have been strong enough to break through Roslia's barrier like that. Was her Impenetrable Fortress weakened too?

I'd thought something might be wrong with Neme, but it seemed too coincidental for both her and Roslia to be compromised at the same time. Something else was going on here. Were spells and arts limited on this floor?

No, that couldn't be it. Pseudo Shadow Runner was as sharp as ever, so I knew that my arts were working just fine. The extra recoil I was feeling was because Neme's Regeneration spell was flagging. Maybe it was just magic being nerfed, then... In which case I would be able to confirm things with Erin.

I let the gargoyle pursuing me fly past me and waited for a chance to look back at them again. At a glance, it seemed Erin's magic was

working like normal. That meant only Neme and Roslia were being inhibited. What was the connection between them?

Ah, of course. Their battle styles. They're both holy classes.

I suddenly recalled a conversation I'd had with Neme on floor 19 in which she explained to me that mages invoked magic differently than paladins and priests. She'd said that mages converted their own mana into spells, whereas priests and paladins called down divine power—in other words, they were fundamentally different. If that was true, it could explain why Erin was fine while Roslia and Neme were struggling.

While I was thinking all this, Jin and Force defeated the gargoyle they were tag-teaming. Apparently not even the mobs of floor 21 could stand up to two Arrivers at once. Force then moved to help Roslia, and Jin came over to support me. To be honest, I was fine on my own, but there was no need to take unnecessary risks under the circumstances. We could play it safe and share aggro to buy more time.

It wasn't long afterward that Force, Erin, and Roslia finished off their gargoyle, and then the six of us ganged up on the last one. It wasn't even a boss fight, but the battle ended up dragging out quite a bit. Floor 21 was shaping up to be tougher than we'd imagined. It was said that the dungeon got dramatically harder every five floors, meaning we'd just hit the next uptick in difficulty.

Once the fight was over and we'd all had a chance to catch our breath, I decided to run my theory by everyone.

"Say, Neme, did you notice anything funny about your spells during the battle?"

"Now that you mention it, maybe...? But maybe not...? Yeah!"

"Which is it...?"

What a vague answer. Had she not noticed anything? Was it all in my head?

"What about you, Roslia?" I asked next.

"Yeah, totally! I was in a *really* bad way, and then Erin yelled at me, 'What are you casting such flimsy spells for?! Use your magic properly, you dunce!' Isn't she just the meanest?"

"I called you a dunce because you were fighting like one!"

So they still managed to antagonize each other even in the middle of combat...

I shot the still-shouting Erin a sidelong glance, then proceeded to explain to the group why I'd asked in the first place.

"...And so I think holy magic was weakened," I said in summary. "I want to know what everyone else's take on it is."

"I was thinking the same thing," said Force. "Purgatory was really

eating at me. The damage wasn't being healed at all, though I just assumed Neme was slacking off."

"Neme would never do that!"

"Was it some special effect of the gargoyles, then? Weakening holy magic, I mean," Jin said pensively, his hand against his chin.

"I suppose," I said with a shrug. "That's the only possibility I can think of."

"I've never heard of such an effect before. This floor is unknown territory, however, so I imagine a few surprises are in order," he replied with a sage nod, seemingly convinced.

That much was true. No currently active parties had ever reached floor 21. Only one had ever done it in the past, and there were no detailed records from the time. No living soul knew anything about the monsters and traps of this place. Considering we'd just hit a difficulty uptick too, we'd have to be especially careful here.

As I was thinking that, my mental map updated itself.

"Huh?" I squeaked when I saw it.

"What's wrong now?" Erin asked.

"Well..."

I was so dumbstruck by what I was looking at that I could barely manage a reply. But I couldn't just keep this to myself... I had to tell everyone.

And so I announced in a voice loud enough for all to hear, "I think I just found the door to the next floor..."

"What?! Already?! We've barely been here for half an hour!" Erin yelled.

"Yeah, I know..."

She was, understandably, just as surprised as I had been. There was no way we'd reached the end of the floor so soon. We'd only just begun exploring, and we'd only faced a single group of monsters. There hadn't even been a mid-boss, which had graced every floor since 16.

We'd struggled our way through the dungeon so far, especially on the last few floors. We'd never cleared one this easily. But I didn't see a boss chamber anywhere—I couldn't even detect the presence of a boss at all. Yet if this door was really the end, then that would be that. Kind of anticlimactic, really. Even floor 1, the easiest floor of all, was punctuated with a boss fight.

I could clearly envision the route to said door with Mapping, but we needed to stay on our toes until we actually saw it with our own eyes. We might be in for another surprise like the gargoyles, after all. They didn't register with Enemy Search in statue form, so it would be all too easy to catch us off guard if we weren't wary. There was also a possibility that the door was a fake—just the kind of malicious trap I'd

expect on floor 21.

“We’re done already? Gee, this place was nothing special!” Neme giggled.

“Don’t get too ahead of yourself,” I scolded, landing a light chop on the top of her head.

“Hey, what was that for?!” she fussed, glaring up at me as she rubbed her noggin.

“Relaxing now will only invite carelessness. Please stay serious, Miss Neme.”

“Note’s right. Keep your guard up, Neme,” Jin agreed.

“Is that, like, even possible for her?” asked the paladin.

“For once, I’m with Roslia,” chimed in Erin.

“You two, stop making fun of Neme! I can be serious when I want to be!”

“Really?” Force asked with a mocking look.

I was about to add my two cents, but the view ahead stopped me in my tracks.

“Isn’t that the door?” Erin asked, pointing.

She was indicating a staircase emanating the same faint purple glow of the sun here. At the top towered a familiar door... the one we saw at the end of every floor.

“So it seems, but...” Roslia muttered, understandably hesitant.

In front of the staircase stood a huge, dark bronze statue roughly four meters in height. It had slender limbs and a humanoid body with sinister-looking horns and wings. Its keen face was exactly what you’d imagine when you thought “demon.”

The statue stood upright on the toes of its right foot, its leg bent like a knotted tree. It held a sword with both arms, the blade of which shone with the same purple light as the stairs. There were letters scrawled across it that looked like wriggling earthworms. The sword itself would have been an oversized broadsword for a human, though it seemed small compared to the size of the statue. If that statue swung it, it could easily do so one-handed.

“It must be a magic sword...” Jin murmured at the sight of the mysterious weapon.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“A blade with a special effect, like Force’s Purgatory,” he explained.

I looked up at the demon statue’s face. This was probably the boss of floor 21. I couldn’t sense anything with Enemy Search, but I was sure nonetheless. It *looked* like a boss, and that wasn’t to mention the bizarre aura of power it seemed to emit. If we got too close, it would likely come to life and attack. I thought it was curious there was no boss chamber, but perhaps there wouldn’t be from now on in the end

floors.

“What should we do?” I asked Jin.

If the sword in the statue’s clutches was magical like he suspected, it could be a great threat. Purgatory was terrifying even in the hands of an ally, so it was chilling to imagine our enemy with it—or something even worse. There was no telling what power this weapon held.

“All we can do is proceed,” Jin answered, taking a step forward. “Fortunately we haven’t depleted any of our stamina yet, so we’re still in top fighting form. We can’t let cowardice drive us back now.”

Neme and Erin were to hang back on the rear line per usual. Roslia and Force moved to the front of the group, and I took the middle ground.

“Regenerate Plus! Rise Up! Full Attack! Guardian’s Protection! Fortress! Saint’s Protection!” Neme incanted, bestowing us with her usual lineup of buffs.

Roslia then preemptively readied Beacon to draw the boss’s attention immediately. This was it. We were now fully prepared for battle.

Once we were all ready, Force took another step forward. The moment he did, the statue’s eyes lit up red. An overwhelming air of hostility washed over us all. The black bronze of the statue’s body began cracking, fragments splintering off and crumbling like dust.

The ground shook, rattling the air right along with it. The low rumble reverberated in our very bones... and that was just the sound of the demon taking a single step forward, spreading its wings in an intimidating display of its sheer size.

The slumbering boss of this floor, undisturbed by adventurers for years now, had just awoken.

Force drew Purgatory and broke into a run. Roslia slipped to the left and pulsed her Beacon to draw the demon’s attention. Jin followed Force’s lead.

The demon opened its mouth and uttered words only perceptible as static noise. It was a rapid incantation, which I only realized when a purple bubble of light began radiating outward from the magic sword.

In the blink of an eye, everything was tinted a different color. The bubble had encompassed us and spread even farther to engulf the entire area. Once it was complete, I suddenly felt heavy... like I was being weighed down with the force of gravity. The invincible sense of elation that had been coursing through my body was now completely negated.

Is it physical ability reduction? Some kind of debuff?

While I was trying to comprehend what was happening to me, I

noticed something else. The light of Roslia's Beacon had faded. And that wasn't all... The aura of Neme's Regenerate Plus had faded too. No, all of her buffs were gone. That was when it hit me.

The complete nullification of holy spells...

I had assumed the weakening effect was a special ability of the gargoyles from earlier—but I was oh-so wrong. That was just child's play. An inferior version of the real deal before us.

Even now as Neme tried to recast her dispelled buffs, nothing happened. She simply swung her staff through the air without any effect.

My attention suddenly snapped to the demonic presence approaching.

What? When did it get so close?

The demon's dark figure loomed, then passed overhead. It leaped over me in a single bound, heading straight for Erin and Neme on the rear line. It all happened so fast that I could hardly keep up.

Without Roslia's Beacon, they must have caught the boss's attention somehow...

With that belated thought racing through my mind, I hurriedly activated Bloodlust. It just wasn't enough to distract the boss!

Its red eyes glinted as it set its sights on Erin, who was preparing to cast an attack spell. I saw a flash of sinister light from the magic sword as the demon swung it... The next moment, it was like the world came to a halt.

I have to do something... But what?

Time resumed while I was still bewildered. The demon swept its sword horizontally, aiming to get Erin and Neme both in one swing. A cloud of dust billowed up, painting my vision the color of ash. I couldn't see anything other than a dark shadow through it all.

It was Jin.

I could tell via Enemy Search that he'd been blown away, but the dust died down to reveal a black bubble before the demon. It looked a bit like an amoeba, and it was functioning as a barrier. A sort of metal shield fashioned from Mineral Shapeshifting. I could tell at a glance it was the same black material as Jin's trademark dagger.

"J-Jin! He covered us and—!" Erin yelled.

I immediately understood the situation. She and Neme had survived the attack thanks to Jin deflecting it. He hadn't escaped unscathed, however. He took the brunt of it himself, which was what had sent him flying.

What should I do?

Erin and Neme weren't out of the woods yet. The demon was still on top of them. They were in just as much danger as before... which left me no choice.

With Jin out of the picture and Roslia's Beacon ineffective, I had to distract the boss myself. I channeled all of my energy into Bloodlust, forcing the demon to turn my way.

"Pseudo Shadow Runner!"

I didn't have Neme's recovery spells to save me from the recoil, but I didn't care. The demon was far too fast with that magic sword. I wouldn't be able to dodge it without help. With no fear for the repercussions, I was going all out.

I hurled myself up into the air, clearing the magic sword as it sailed under my feet. It was pure instinct. If I hadn't jumped at exactly that moment, I wouldn't have made it in time. Without warning, the demon brought its free hand down on me next.

Withdraw!

I leaped away with all my might. My reaction was a little slow. Or rather, the demon's attack was just that fast. I crouched low to brace for the incoming shockwave and raised both arms in front of me to block the rubble flying through the air.

There was a purple glint within the dust cloud—a follow-up attack.

I had no idea what was coming or what kind of reach it had. All I had to go on were my instincts, and I heeded them. The demon's sword sliced through the air just a few centimeters away from where I'd jumped.

I won't be able to completely avoid the next one...

Watching the tip of the magic sword graze the ground as it slid my way, I prepared myself for the worst. And just as the heavy swing was about to reach me...

Sparks scattered into the air. It was Force, who was holding off the demon's sword with his own black blade. Dark flames licked up his arm all the way to his cheek—the curse of Purgatory, which burned its wielder. And right now, Force was using it without Neme's buffs to bolster him. He wouldn't be able to keep this up for long.

"Leave the big guy to me, Note! Get the others and regroup!"

Easier said than done...

I swiftly looked around. Roslia was looking around wildly in confusion. Erin's knees had given out as she cowered behind the metal shield. Neme was swinging her staff furiously, trying to muster magic that just wouldn't come.

What is this...? What the hell happened? How did things end up such a disaster?

I knew that panicking wouldn't solve anything, but what else was I supposed to do? Force had told me to get the others and regroup, but that was *his* job. He was the leader.

If only Jin were here...

My thoughts turned to our missing assassin.

Wait, that's right! Jin! My first priority should be to get him back on the battlefield!

He'd undoubtedly been injured earlier when he was sent flying, though I was sure we could get him back in action with a little healing. The boss's spell negation bubble was big, but it wasn't endless. As long as Neme could get outside of it...

"Neme! Go find Jin and heal him!"

"By myself?!"

Yeah, okay, that *was* a tall order. Jin had been blown a good distance, and Neme might end up encountering gargoyles on her way to him. I couldn't even help her out with Enemy Search since the statues didn't register on my mental map before they came to life. It was a hairy situation, and I certainly couldn't let Neme go alone.

"Take Roslia with you!" I cried.

"But my spells are..." she hemmed.

She was still thrown for a loop by the chaos. Understandably so. Her standard fighting strategy relied on her magic, so she likely felt powerless right now. If my arts gave out on me in the middle of battle, I'd be pretty dazed too.

"What about your Guide of the Holy Sword?! Can't you use Fractus?!"

Roslia looked at the sword in her right hand, then...

"Yeah, you're right! I'll escort her!"

She took off with her holy sword in hand and Neme in tow.

Without her holy spells, Roslia's combat potential was as good as halved. I honestly didn't know whether she'd be able to handle the gargoyles of floor 21 on her own, but Force had his hands full with the boss right now. Purgatory was still eating at him, so he was pushing himself pretty hard already. I had to stay on standby in case he needed me to step in. That only left Erin, but she wouldn't make much of a shield for Neme even if she tried. That meant Roslia and Roslia alone would have to see the escort mission through.

How did things fall apart so terribly without Jin...?

The clashing sound of metal on metal rang out through the room. Force was overpowered and sent flying. He stabbed his sword into the ground to support himself and stay upright.

"What's with this thing...? It's too strong..." I heard him mutter.

He was right. The boss of floor 21 was ridiculously strong. Its speed was one thing, but its power was overwhelming all on its own. Even if you evaded one attack, the ensuing shockwave was enough to catch you and leave you vulnerable to the next.

So Force lost in a contest of strength, and I was outmanned in terms of speed. Neme and Roslia were completely cut off from their

holy powers. Honestly, I didn't see a way for us to win.

“Binding!”

Having determined we couldn't beat the boss as things stood, Erin switched from attack spells to a restrictive one. Chains made of magical energy bound the demon's giant limbs. Just like in the fight against the gargoyles, it seemed at least her magic was working at full capacity.

Good thinking, Erin! Buy us as much time as you can!

Things were looking up, but this was the boss of floor 21. One spell wasn't enough to bind it forever. It struggled against its magical chains, which were already creaking. It was only a matter of time before they snapped.

I looked to Force, who was back on his feet and ready to tangle with the boss if it suddenly broke free—but at a cost. Purgatory continued to ravage him. Its black flames had now spread across his entire body. Just looking at him was painful. He wouldn't last like this...

And if we lost Force, that would be the end of the line. I wouldn't be able to hold the boss off myself for long. Our earlier tussle had made that quite clear. I was also on a countdown to the backlash of Pseudo Shadow Runner taking effect.

With a hex-like chant, the demon finally broke free of Erin's magical chains. Its wicked, grotesque eyes fell on her again. I activated Bloodlust and charged in, successfully distracting the boss's attention. But that was just the beginning of things. I was in for a whirlwind of deadly attacks.

I moved my body, twisting and ducking this way and that. Try as I might, I knew I'd only be able to handle two or three swings. Any more than that was a pipe dream. And just as I thought the fatal attack would befall me, Force jumped in to save me again.

Without missing a beat, Erin activated another restraining spell. The boss, however, seemed to have grown wise. It fainted as if flying away, keeping Erin from landing a direct hit. With only a couple of its limbs bound, the demon would break free in no time.

This was really bad. At this rate, all three of us were goners.

What do we do? How do we save ourselves now?

No matter how I racked my brain, I couldn't see a way. No light, no salvation came to me. We were simply overwhelmed. Outpowered. There was no turning this situation around with a stroke of luck. We were just too weak.

Force was nearly at his limit already. The flames consuming his body were a dark conflagration now. We didn't have as long as I'd hoped. A few more seconds and it would all be over... Or so I feared.

While I was watching Force's imposing figure with bated breath, I

sensed a presence approaching rapidly. The next moment, a black shadow descended on the battlefield...

“Sorry for the wait.”

It was Jin, shrouded in Shadow Runner.

“Are you okay?!” I called out the second I saw Jin.

His black outfit was darkened with bloodstains. The boss must have landed a direct hit when he covered for Erin and Neme. His shirt was ripped open at the abdomen. There was no visible wound, but I could only imagine what had been there before help arrived.

“Neme healed me up. See? The bleeding’s already stopped,” he replied with a smile.

And just as he said, I couldn’t see any blood other than what was still dripping off his clothes. Neme must have gotten him outside the debuff field and used her magic on him.

“That’s great! Where are Neme and Roslia now?” I asked next.

“They told me you guys were having a rough time, so I rushed back first. They’re still on their way,” Jin explained briefly. He then turned to Force, who was still holding the boss at bay, and yelled loudly, “We’re retreating! I’ll handle the boss, so switch out with me! Note, you lead the way! Collect Neme and Roslia as you go!”

Then, without even waiting for a reply, he dashed toward Force.

Retreat?

That option hadn’t even occurred to me until Jin gave the order. If you were up against an opponent you couldn’t defeat, you retreated. It was that simple. I felt pathetic for not putting it together myself in the heat of the moment... but now wasn’t the time to wallow in regret.

I pulled myself together and followed Jin’s instructions. I led the charge back toward the warp crystal so we could escape this floor. I glanced over my shoulder to see Force and Erin following me, and Jin squaring off with the demon. Force was normally quick on his feet, but he was in a bad way now. He could barely keep up with Erin.

It was only once we began our retreat that I realized how devious this floor truly was. With no boss chamber, the demon was free to roam its halls and chase us down indefinitely. No other floor had been like this. Leaving the boss chamber had always been enough to deaggro the boss before now. Panic surged within me as things turned grimmer by the second...

“Damn it all!”

Our attempts to shake the demon weren’t working. As a result, Jin was still playing rearguard to protect us. If he were alone, he easily could have used his arts to break away from it. But with Erin and the battered Force in tow, we had to match their speed. Jin was doing his best to pull all of our weight.

Should I jump in to help him? Even if I did, I can’t imagine being lucky

enough to evade more than a few attacks from the boss... I'd probably just get in Jin's way.

I fretfully pondered our situation as I continued to run as fast as my legs could carry me. For now, we needed to reconnect with Neme and Roslia. We could handle everything else from there.

An ear-piercing explosion suddenly erupted behind us. All of the pillars in the area had been smashed. The boss of floor 21 was swinging its magic sword with enough force to destroy the temple... all in order to target Jin. The demon was so singularly focused on him that nothing else seemed to matter.

Next, it slammed its magic sword down against the stone floor. The impact shook the whole hallway, causing Force to lose his balance. He stumbled and stopped to catch himself... which put him within the boss's reach.

Fortunately, Jin threw himself forward to ward off the demon's incoming blade. It was an awkward, improvised move, however, that cost him his dagger. It went flying from his hands the moment the magic sword made contact with it. Yet Jin didn't bat an eye. One of the metal bands around his body began shifting in shape, stretching into his hand as it formed another dagger.

In that time, Force regained his equilibrium and started running again. I waited for him to catch up before getting back to full speed myself. I looked forward into the darkness before us. Neme and Roslia were up ahead—I could sense their presences. I ran toward them for all I was worth. I knew their magic would still be sealed here, but I still felt like *something* would change when we reunited with them. And so I charged forward, clinging to that thought.

White figures finally emerged from the darkness and grew bigger... We were getting closer. I could finally make out the color of their hair. We were getting near the exit, too. Yet when the girls saw us approaching, they stopped in place and started yelling. Were they calling to us? The rumbling and clanging of the ongoing fight behind us drowned out their voices. I couldn't tell what they were saying.

Still, we weren't too far from the warp crystal now. We should be able to make our escape like this. I continued to run toward the girls with hope in my heart, and as I got closer, their words became clearer.

"Jin!"

"Jin is...!"

It sounded like they were calling Jin's name. Had something happened? I ran closer still, and then was finally able to make out their frantic screaming...

"Jin's wound is—"

"Don't push yourself, Jin! You'll die!"

His wound? He's going... to die? What are they talking about?

I whipped around in a panic. Jin was still handling the boss, parrying attack after attack. Nothing seemed any different. The fight was just as intense as it had been on the way here...

But then something caught my eye—a spreading stain on the front of Jin’s shirt. He was half soaked in blood. It had seeped all the way down to the hem of his pants.

He’s still bleeding?

My mind went blank. Jin wasn’t bleeding earlier. Neme had healed him, so...

“What’s going on?!” I demanded as soon as I reached Roslia.

“Hurry, Note! Go!” she screamed, shaking her head as tears fell from her eyes. “Go switch out with Jin, or else— His wound hasn’t healed!”

“What?! Neme was supposed to heal him before he got back in the fray!”

“She did! She healed all his other wounds, but the one from the magic sword just refused to take! Yet he insisted on going back to save everyone anyway!”

What...?

Hearing that was like a slap in the face. How could I have known?

“He’s in no condition to be fighting!” Roslia continued without pause. “He needs immediate medical attention! We could only stop the bleeding temporarily, but he’s in mortal danger! I’ll assist you, so hurry and swap places with Jin!”

Her words registered like meaningless white noise in my head. What was she saying? Jin was in mortal danger...?

We have to move! We can’t waste any time here!

The warp crystal was just up ahead. I could see the faint blue light it emitted from here. That meant we’d hit the safe zone—a natural barrier against monsters—before long, and this whole nightmare would be over.

But in the meantime, like Roslia had said, I needed to take over for Jin.

“You can back off, Jin! I’ll take it from here!” I called out, my dagger at the ready as Jin evaded yet another fierce attack from the demon.

He then smoothly replied, “I’ll be okay. This boss is a little out of your league yet. Leave it to me and lead the others to safety!”

“But—”

I wanted to argue, but Jin was right. I was no match for the boss of floor 21. I wouldn’t last more than three blows—a couple of seconds max if I got lucky. There was no way I could hold the demon off for several minutes like Jin had. I was just too weak. I didn’t have the strength to challenge an end floor boss by myself.

I bit down on my lip and turned away from Jin, refocusing my gaze on the warp crystal. I would lead the party there like he'd asked. Roslia looked like she was going to object but, in the end, deferred to our judgment and said nothing.

We then continued down the hall until we got to Neme, who I grabbed and threw over my shoulder. And after that, I just ran. With all my might, as though I had shaken off all hesitation and fear. I ran, thinking only of survival. I ran and ran, the light of the crystal drawing nearer. We'd hit the safe zone any second now...

The instant my feet crossed its barrier, my momentum hurtled me inside its protection. Neme and I went rolling across the floor. Roslia was next, followed by Erin. Force tumbled in a second or so later. Everyone was safe now... Everyone except Jin.

He was still locked in combat with the boss—and a good distance away, at that. He was so far away that the swift movements of his limbs only registered as thin lines in my vision. Erin took the opportunity to cast a spell in hopes of giving him a chance to retreat. Magic chains rapidly ensnared the demon, binding it in place. It seemed she'd landed a good hit this time.

"Come on, Jin!" she yelled.

Jin waited a moment to make sure the boss was restricted, then activated Withdraw. Perhaps because he was wounded, it looked slower than usual. That was the vague impression that passed through my mind as I watched him. He was now halfway between us and the demon...

So I didn't understand what happened at first. I thought the demon swung its glowing purple sword into the ground... Yet it was now protruding from Jin's torso, piercing straight through him.



Jin's eyes were wide open. His warm, red irises were almost sparkling. The color of the blood spurting out was such a vivid crimson that it looked fake. Like something artificial. Manmade. And I couldn't do anything but watch.

Surely this was some illusion. Some act. There wasn't actually a sword running through him. Jin was safe. The boss of floor 21 wasn't real. We weren't even in the dungeon right now. This was just some nightmare. Something that was happening to someone else in a faraway world that had nothing to do with me.

I mean, that couldn't be Jin over there. No way in hell. Jin was strong. Stronger than anyone. The strongest of all. There was no way he'd be struck down by a dungeon monster. So that bleeding figure over there... No, that absolutely couldn't be him. It was someone else. Someone imitating Jin.

Who, though? There was no one here aside from us Arrivers. Moreover, who *would* do that?

Of course... It had to be some monster. Some evil imitating Jin. It was trying to confuse us. To make it look like Jin had been run through. But I was onto it now. I wouldn't be fooled any longer. There was no way Jin would go down like that. He'd never let the enemy hit him.

But then what about the real Jin? Where was he now? I looked around... and saw nothing. Jin was nowhere to be found. Where had he gone? Was he hiding? Perhaps he'd left ahead of us. Yes, he was back in Puriff now.

No...

That was the least believable scenario of all. Jin would never leave us behind. Which meant... he was really the blood-soaked body on the floor after all.

I knew that. I'm not an idiot. I'd known all along.

The boss had thrown its magic sword, mercilessly impaling Jin. The demon must have loosened the restraints on its right arm by wriggling, and with the slack it gained, it had hurled its cursed weapon. That was it. Nothing more, nothing less.

And now the demon, which had fully broken free from the rest of its ligatures, sauntered toward Jin to retrieve its wicked blade.

Stop! If you do that—

There was so, so much gushing blood. The demon heaved its sword high... for another strike, I imagined, but the blade stopped midair. The demon then turned away like it had lost interest in us intruders. It spread its massive wings and flew off. Within seconds, the boss was gone and all was quiet.

Thank god it didn't finish him off...

Or so I thought initially, but that wasn't quite right. The boss didn't need to finish him off... because it already had.

There were five people on floor 21, all five within the safe zone. Enemy Search revealed the cruel truth. It was just Erin, Roslia, Neme, Force, and me now. The quiet, reliable presence I'd always felt nearby since the day I joined the Arrivers...

He was gone.

Loss

Ten days had passed since we returned from floor 21.

After what happened, we carried Jin's cold body back to Puriff. Even though she knew it was impossible, Neme frantically tried casting spells over and over to revive him. Force chastised her for it, and it turned into an argument. Erin got involved, at which point the whole thing blew up. Even Roslia yelled at them for it.

But what else were we supposed to do? None of us knew how to cope with the death of a party member. We were all desperate. All lost.

A passing party caught wind of the commotion and sympathetically gave us guidance. Not knowing what else to do, we followed their calm advice.

The next thing I knew, Jin's body was laid to rest in a coffin, ready to be cremated. Things happened so fast afterward that my head couldn't keep up. There was just so much to do... I'd never known there was so much paperwork after someone died. I hardly had time to grapple with what had happened.

But once the funeral service was over, I suddenly had nothing but time. There was nothing left to keep me from confronting the grim reality of Jin's death.

If only I had ignored his order and taken his place... If only I'd been strong enough for him to trust me...

Unfortunately, my regrets didn't stop there. It would've been better if they had, but no. My grief turned bitter as it lashed out against the other party members.

If only Erin's binding spell had actually stopped the demon... If only Force and Roslia had supported Jin better...

I was full of misdirected anger. But there was no way I could take it out on my comrades, who were grieving all the same. They were likely just as mad at me... And that thought terrified me.

It got to the point where I couldn't look any of them in the face. It hurt too much. I started staying away from the party house in order to avoid everyone. Were they all doing the same thing? I wouldn't know. I hadn't talked to any of them.

I woke up every morning at eleven, washed my face, and left immediately. I ate a combined late breakfast/early lunch, then wandered somewhere in town I could be alone... and quietly waited

for the sun to set. I always ate dinner outside, dragging it out as long as possible by eating slowly. Then I'd make my way back home in the dark of night. And once I was there, I'd head straight to bed after bathing.

Every day was just a repeat of that. I hadn't spoken to a soul yesterday. I wondered what the others were up to... but there was also a part of me that didn't want to know.

Dungeoneering was naturally off the table now. No one was stupid enough to say they wanted to go back anyway, but the Arrivers were a dungeon-diving party. Without it, we had plenty of free time on our hands. And without dungeon diving, there was no reason to keep training. I'd scrapped my usual routine, which left me with utterly nothing to do.

What now? What should I be doing from here on? I don't know anything...

There was nothing I wanted to do, and nothing that demanded my attention. The Arrivers were a top-tier dungeon party. We were short on funds, but still had enough saved up to cover our living expenses for the time being. It would be a while before we had to get back to work... So all I did was eat and sleep. I was in no mood for any kind of recreation or entertainment.

When my childhood friend bid me farewell, I tried to drink away the pain. I got drunk day after day to cast a fog over the unwanted thoughts crowding my head. But losing Jin was different. It was just as painful—worse, even—yet I couldn't bring myself to drown out the misery with booze.

Jin was dead because I... because we weren't strong enough. We'd grown complacent in the dungeon and relied on him too much. We were all at fault. We knew the dungeon swallowed adventurers. That it had taken many before us... and yet we'd arrogantly believed that we would be spared.

Thus we had to learn the hard way.

I couldn't wash away my sins with alcohol. I'd be too ashamed to face Jin if I tried. I simply sat and contemplated his death without the help of the bottle. Thinking of him was all I did. Nary another thought crossed my mind as I passed each day in silence.

Nothing more.

I woke up that morning and got changed like usual. I was at the front door putting on my shoes when Force emerged from the living room.

"Note, are you free tonight? I need to talk to everyone," he said.

I'd gotten ready to leave in a hurry so that I wouldn't have to see anyone, but he'd caught me nonetheless. He must have been waiting

for me. Honestly, I really didn't want to talk. Talking wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't bring Jin back.

"Sorry. I have plans tonight. Some other time."

I was lying, of course. I had absolutely nothing to do.

"I see..." he said, looking down. Under the impression that concluded our conversation, I turned to leave. Yet as I put my hand on the doorknob, he continued, "When's a good time for you, then?"

How would I know? Don't ask me.

I wasn't sure I would ever feel like talking again. I couldn't have answered him honestly if I'd wanted to.

"Who knows?" I said. "I won't know until the time is right, so I can't promise—"

"So you don't feel like talking at all, huh?" He understood the implicit rejection and didn't bother trying to hide the irritation in his voice. "Everyone else is going to be there. You're the only one who said no, and we can't do this without you."

Why was he acting like this now? The Force I knew was unreliable and irresponsible. He'd never made an effort to bring the party together before. He only ever did as he pleased. Yet here he was, acting like a big damn man at the worst possible time. Was he trying to play the leader now that Jin was gone? Did he think he could unite us in Jin's stead?

It's too late for that. If you wanted to lead us, you should've picked up the slack while Jin was still alive. You could have eased the burden on him that way, but did you? No.

I wanted nothing more than to lay into Force, but I knew taking my anger out on him wasn't fair. I put the lid on my frothing rage and searched my soul for more productive words to use.

"What is it you want to talk about?" I managed.

"Our future. We can't just keep doing nothing, you know? So I want to talk with everyone about where we go from here."

That was valid. A reasonable thing to do, even. Force was ready to face what came next. He was far better off than me, who was still cowering from the truth.

But things were fine the way they were. I didn't have to confront Jin's death and accept it all at once. Who cared if I spent my days doing nothing? That was all I *could* do right now. I had no motivation to strive for anything, and the idea of the future was exhausting. I just wanted to rest a little longer.

"In that case, my vote is for maintaining the current status quo," I told Force. "You can discuss the rest without me."

"No, we can't. It's not that I don't respect your opinion... I just don't think you should entrust me to convey it without participating in the discussion at all yourself."

How annoying. I don't want to talk to anyone. Can't you get that through your head already?

"Sorry. I have something to do, Force. Are we done here?"

"Is whatever you have to do more important than a party meeting?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you. Mind your own business."

"You don't have to be like that..." Force said in a low voice, his fists shaking with fury.

I turned my back on him, pretending not to notice.

"Like I said, have the discussion without me. I'm not participating. In exchange, I'll go along with whatever you guys decide. Does that work for you?"

I forcefully put an end to the conversation there by twisting the knob, throwing the door open, and fleeing into town. Without looking back, I bolted away from HQ as fast as my legs could carry me. I had no particular destination in mind. Just anywhere quiet.

And so I wasted another day keeping to myself. Little did I know change was brewing under my nose. I wouldn't find out about it until I returned to HQ that night.

Apparently, Erin and Force had announced their intentions to leave the Arrivers.

The Party Falls Apart

“What do you mean Force left?”

At first, I couldn’t understand what Erin was saying. It felt like it had been ages since we’d talked... That was the first whimsical thought that passed through my mind when she approached me.

“Exactly what I said,” Erin replied curtly.

“He left the Arrivers? Or he left Puriff?”

“Both.”

“Why? Where would he even go?!”

“He said he was fed up with being weak. That he was going to train himself over again. No one asked where exactly he was going or how he planned on doing that.”

“I guess he won’t be back for a while...”

“Dunno,” Erin said with a shake of her head. “We didn’t ask when he was coming back... or if he even would.”

“What’s going to happen to the Arrivers, then?! Jin’s gone, and now Force is too!”

“I don’t know the answer to that either, though I don’t think we can really keep going like this. I imagine we’ll disband.”

Disband...?

The cold echo of that word sent a chill down my spine. How could she say something so heartless? Jin had worked hard for this party. It was a monument to his memory. Throwing it all away was unthinkable.

“Why didn’t you stop Force...?” I muttered.

There, Erin grabbed me by the collar and started shouting.

“I *tried*, Note! But there’s no stopping him! It’s Force we’re talking about here! Once he sets his mind to something, you can’t convince him otherwise! Besides, if you care that much, you should have stopped him yourself!”

“But I wasn’t at the—”

I froze halfway through my sentence as a frosty calm washed over me. *I* was the one who’d refused to attend the meeting. I couldn’t blame anyone else for what happened while I wasn’t there. That fell squarely on me.

Erin had had the courage to face Force, whereas I hid behind my grief like an excuse. I’d had my turn to stop him, and I’d passed it up. When Force had said he wanted to discuss our future, I assumed that

meant he'd gotten over Jin's death—but that wasn't the case. Force was just as hurt as I was. He was grieving in his own way. I was okay with things the way they were, but he wasn't... And that was why he'd decided to leave.

That was my fault. I'd only been able to think of myself in my grief. I hadn't spared a thought for anyone else's feelings. I'd selfishly assumed that I was the only one still in mourning. That I was the only one going through this.

But I wasn't alone. Everyone else was miserable too. We were all hurt. Erin's next words made that painfully clear to me...

"I've been giving it some thought, and I think I'm going to leave Puriff myself."

I was shocked. I'd never imagined Erin would leave too.

"Why...?" I managed to ask hoarsely, finally raising my head to look her in the eye.

"Same as Force. After hearing what he said, I decided to relearn magic from scratch too," she said. "Jin's dead because of me. I couldn't restrain the boss properly, and Jin paid for it... all because I'm too weak!"

"The boss was just that strong, Erin. It wasn't your fault that—"

"Thanks, but I don't need empty words of consolation," she muttered coldly. She then suddenly asked, "Have you heard of white magic before?"

I wasn't sure where she was going with this, but I nodded and answered honestly.

"The mage version of healing magic, right? I've heard it's rare—" I said, coming to a halt in realization. "Don't tell me..."

"We couldn't use holy magic, but white magic might have worked. If I had healed Jin or Force, things might have turned out differently."

"Why didn't you, then?"

"Because I don't know how," she said with a bitter smile.

"Remember how I have the Universal Elemental Magic Aptitude skill? That allows me to use it... I just never bothered to learn it."

"But you've been working so hard at studying magic!"

"Only since we got back from floor 20, remember?"

"Still..."

"If I'd studied more in the past, Jin wouldn't have had to die! If I hadn't quit school, if I hadn't stopped learning magic after joining the Arrivers, if I hadn't ignored my shortcomings for so long, if I hadn't pissed Cathy off... Jin would still be alive!"

Somewhere, in the middle of shouting, she started crying. She was trembling. I could see now that Jin's death had broken her, just like it had me.

"Erin..." I said quietly.

Seeing her sob like this just made me want to hug her. I spread my arms wide and went to wrap them around her shoulders, but...

"Sorry. I can't accept your kindness right now." She raised her hands and gently—so very gently—pushed me away. "I'm weak, Note. I'll just end up relying on you if you're near. So I've decided to work hard on my own. I'm going to leave. I'll learn magic anew. I'm not going to depend on anyone anymore. I just need to go back home and completely forget about magic for a bit."

"What... are you saying...?"

What am I supposed to do, then?

I'd lost the man I admired most in the world. My savior. My mentor. My role model, in spite of his dark past.

And now I was about to lose the girl I wanted to be with... the person I wanted to protect more than anyone else. Who was I going to depend on?

My arms, still outstretched to embrace Erin, hung in the air. Should I reach for her again? Or give up? I was frozen with hesitation.

"So, Note, this is goodbye for a while. I'll miss you, but I'm going to work hard. Don't forget about me."

"Wait! Don't just go and decide that yourself! How long is 'a while'? How long am I supposed to wait?!"

"I don't know. Until I'm ready, I guess?"

"I don't want that! I need to be with you! Please don't leave me!"

I knew I was being selfish. After all that time I'd spent pushing her and the others away, here I was trying to keep them from leaving. I just... didn't want to lose anyone else precious to me.

Erin smiled through her tears and said, "Don't get needy now. I won't know what to do. Still, I'm kind of happy..."

"Why are you smiling? I'm being serious here!"

"I didn't expect you to care enough to try and stop me. Honestly, I had no idea I meant that much to you. You really keep your feelings to yourself, don't you?"

I hadn't known Erin felt that way about me either. If I had, I would have been more honest.

"So... thank you, Note. For trying to stop me. For caring so much. For telling me."

"I'm sorry I never said it before now. I'll be good to you from now on. I'll be honest with you. So, please, don't joke about leaving."

"I'm not joking. I've already made up my mind. I can't go back on that, regardless of what you say. I'm very sorry," she said, taking a step back and turning away. "But you're really going to shake my resolve like this, so let's part ways here. Is there anything else you want to say?"

Yes, of course! Lots! There's so much I haven't said, so please don't

leave now...

“You don’t have to study magic, Erin! The party is already done for! We won’t be dungeon diving anymore, so you don’t have to go!” My feelings came pouring out of me. “That’s right! Didn’t you say we should quit dungeon diving before? We can go on dates and live out our lives without ever looking back! We can get married and find happiness like normal people! Just like you wanted! Doesn’t that sound great?! Let’s give it a shot, Erin!”

I probably should have said something cooler for a farewell, but I couldn’t help the pitiful plea that left my lips. Erin, however, shook her head as her silver pigtails swayed behind her.

“I sure wasn’t expecting a proposal. I’m happy. I really am, but I can’t accept right now... So I’m sorry, but I take back what I said on floor 20.”

“Wh...”

“It’s true that there’s no pressing reason for me to study magic anymore. I may never set foot in the dungeon again. But I never want to feel that powerless again. So, once and for all, I’m going to face my own demons.”

Why...? Why is Erin abandoning me too?

I didn’t have the words to respond to her rejection. I simply stood there in silence.

“If that’s all, then,” she eventually said, “I have one last thing to tell you.”

There, she turned to me, and...

“I love you, Note. Let’s meet again.”



With those parting words, she returned to her bedroom and quickly gathered her belongings. She then promptly left HQ. And just like that, without saying goodbye, she was gone.

I couldn't stop her. All I could do was sit on my bed and hang my head in my hands.

*

Force wasn't the only selfish one. Erin was too. They'd both made their decisions by themselves and disappeared of their own accord. So what about those of us left behind? What was I meant to do now?

I spent my day sitting on a park bench wondering that. I hadn't wanted Erin to leave. I wanted her to stay with me. I didn't want to be alone. I wasn't as strong as she thought I was. I couldn't live on my own.

I'd withdrawn into my shell after Jin's death because I had a home. A place to return to. A family. And I'd taken that all for granted. I'd thought that they would still be there for me, no matter how terrible I was to them. But, oh, how wrong I was.

Force and Erin were gone now. They both rued their helplessness and were determined to train themselves out of it. There was nothing wrong with that decision. I understood why they'd done it.

But was I supposed to do the same thing? That was the part I was unsure of.

The Arrivers had functionally collapsed. That was an undeniable fact. Half of the party was gone. We didn't have enough members to keep going even if we'd wanted to.

Moreover, there was a question of whether there even *was* a party to be had after Jin's death. Arrivers only was what it was because of Jin, so could it keep going without him? Were the Arrivers still the Arrivers without Jin?

In my eyes, the party was damaged beyond the point of repair. That was why Erin and Force's actions seemed more self-motivated than anything to me. No matter how much stronger they became now, Jin wasn't coming back. The Arrivers were done for. They'd have to find something else to support with their newfound strength.

However, compared to the days I was wasting on autopilot, the fact that they were doing anything at all was praiseworthy. At the very least, I knew I was in the wrong for carrying on this way. So should I start training again from scratch too? Maybe if I did that, I wouldn't have to lose anyone again...

I was part of the reason Jin was dead. If I'd been a little stronger myself, he could have left the rearguard to me. And if he had, surely he'd still be here with us. *I* was the one who needed to get stronger,

not Erin or Force.

It seemed, then, that it was time for me to pick up my training again after all. It wasn't like I had anything else to do. It would certainly be a more meaningful way to spend my time than sitting around like this.

Maybe if I got moving, I could come up with something better. Maybe I could kick my brain into gear alongside my body and escape this dead end I was stuck in.

Well, there's no time like the present... I should get a move on before I change my mind.

I picked myself up off the rusted bench and made my way toward the park exit. The park itself was situated in the middle of the residential district. Valkyrie's base was virtually across town from here, but it was walkable. I figured I would make it there before sunset.

Given the hour, it would be impractical to start training today. But we could at least make arrangements to do so later. That way, even if I lost my resolve... I would still feel compelled to keep our promise to meet up. I was going to create a situation where I *had* to train.

And with that thought, I went to see Riece.

"You came at a great time, Girl Snatcher. Long time no see."

When I rang the doorbell of Valkyrie's base, Riece appeared without any delay.

I was worried she might be out in the dungeon today or something, so I'd lucked out in that regard. She was right—I'd come at a good time. Although, truth be told, I wasn't sure why she'd said that.

"It's been a while, Master," I replied with a small wave. "I'd like to talk to you about something. Are you free?"

"I am. And I'd like to talk to you about something too. Thanks for coming by."

I cocked my head a little, curious what she wanted to talk to me about. I watched as she slipped her shoes on like she was getting ready to go out.

"It's a bit hard to say it here with my party members around, so how about a change of scenery?" she suggested.

"Sure."

"Let's head to the neighborhood cafe then."

I nodded in agreement, and we then took off down the street. The cafe was about a five-minute walk from here. Riece led the way, and I remarked her outfit as I followed along behind her. She was in a light pea green cardigan and a long, maroon skirt.

That's unusual...

I'd never seen her dressed like this before, especially not in a skirt. She was always dressed casually in rugged shorts and a T-shirt, but today she looked more like a normal girl than an adventurer. It was like seeing a new side of her.

Before long, we arrived at our destination. Riece opened the cafe door, and I stepped inside. We then sat across from each other at a table for four.

For the time being, we both ordered a coffee. The waiter who took our orders promptly disappeared behind the counter. Riece and I then sat in silence for some time.

"I wonder how long it's been since I saw you last..." she finally muttered.

"Probably since Jin's funeral," I replied quietly.

"That's right," she said, crossing her arms behind her head and staring out the window. "We didn't really get to talk then, so it feels like it's been extra long."

"Yeah, it's been too long, Master."

I couldn't remember the last calm, level-headed conversation I'd had with someone. I'd been avoiding the other Arrivers, and our interactions were always tense. Like the last time I talked to Force, or when Erin said goodbye.

So getting to chat with Riece was a nice change of pace. A relief. Was it just because she was a third party? I regretted not reaching out to her sooner. Things might have been different if I had.

"So, you had something you wanted to talk about, Note? That's why you came to see me, right?"

"Yes. But you said you had something to talk about too, right?"

"Yup, that's right."

"You can go first if you want."

"I'll take you up on that, then," she said, turning back from the scenery outside. "I'm going to quit adventuring."



Huh?

I was shocked speechless. What was she saying?

“Jin died, yeah?” she continued.

“...Yeah,” I admitted, biting my lip as I nodded.

“That’s what made me realize dungeon diving is impossible for me,” she said in a self-deprecating tone. “The strongest assassin of all fell in the dungeon. Jin, the man I admired... If he couldn’t do it, there’s no way I can.”

Riece clenched her fists tightly, scrunching up the fabric of her skirt at her knees.

That’s right...

Like me, she’d taken Jin’s death pretty hard. She had a crush on him, after all—something I’d completely forgotten about until now.

“I’m an adult, y’know? I gotta face reality soon,” she continued.

“Face reality...?”

“Yup. The reality of dungeon diving. Being an adventurer is hardly a decent occupation, y’know? You get paid to risk it all and fight monsters. It’s like you’re selling off your life piece by piece. I just don’t think I can go on doing that forever...”

The adventurer profession itself was for dreamers. It was perfect for people who didn’t want to work steadily and seriously. Perfect for those who wanted to live freely, however they pleased. Riece was right; we were all just averting our eyes from reality.

“I want to find a stable job with no risks and go back to being an ordinary person. I’ve hit the age where I’m starting to think about getting married, too. I mean, what’s so bad about living a normal life? It’s gotta be better than this life where you can’t hold on to anything you love...”

She was right. She was right and I knew it, but I didn’t want to acknowledge it. I couldn’t concede to her reasoning.

“Dungeon diving was fun. But the rush, the excitement, the thrill... You’ve gotta let ’em go at a certain age. You have to come to terms with reality. Compromise is the smart way to live. That’s what it means to be an adult.”

Was she saying Jin was stupid for dying in the dungeon? That he wasn’t a real adult? I wanted to argue, but when I saw the look in Riece’s enlightened eyes... I knew it was futile. She’d already made up her mind. She was resolved to quit adventuring. This was what Jin’s death had done to her.

She wasn’t asking for my advice. She was just telling me what she’d decided. I was probably a child for being unable to accept it upfront. I didn’t want Riece to leave too—for my own selfish reasons.

“Have you told the other Valkyries yet?” I asked as softly as I

could, hoping she'd waver.

There was no way my immature pleading would shake the resolute Riece. I had no choice but to try a roundabout method, yet even that couldn't stop her...

"I have, and they approve. I'll be leaving Puriff soon," she said.

"I see..."

"I was going to come see you before I left, so I'm glad you came to see me first, Girl Snatcher."

I finally understood why she'd said I came at a good time when she first opened the door. Her outfit today was like a manifestation of her determination. Now that I looked closely, I could see she didn't have her weapons or gear on her either. Instead of her knife holster, a long skirt dangled from her hips.

Looks hard to move around in. I guess she really is quitting...

"So, what did you want to tell me, Note? Was it something similar, perhaps?"

It was my turn in the hot seat. I couldn't ask her to train with me after what she'd just told me, so I came up with a lie on the spot...

"Yeah. I was thinking about quitting adventuring too."

*

It was now the wee hours of the morning, just before daybreak. I was up in my room with the lights on, contemplating things.

"Yeah. I was thinking about quitting adventuring too."

Saying that out loud had felt surprisingly right. There was a sense of relief, like I was giving voice to something that had long been settled in my heart. I must have reached that conclusion shortly after Jin died—I was just unaware of it. Like Riece, I couldn't keep adventuring now that he was gone. I'd even said something similar to Erin...

"We should quit dungeon diving! We can go on dates and live out our lives without ever looking back! We can get married and find happiness like normal people! Just like you wanted! Doesn't that sound great?! Let's give it a shot!"

Perhaps that was what I truly longed for, not dungeoneering.

Surely I could be satisfied with the ordinary happiness of an ordinary life. If someone asked me otherwise, I wouldn't have the confidence to deny it.

There must have been something wrong with me when I turned Erin down on floor 20. I'd meant to say yes. That I wanted to quit the dungeon as soon as we made it out alive and never look back... I'd just messed up and said no by mistake. That had to be it.

I'd only ever tried to become an adventurer because it was the dream of my childhood friend. I'd just gotten so sucked into it that,

somewhere along the way, I fell under the delusion that it was my own dream. I kept it up after she was gone sheerly out of lingering regret. I never *really* wanted to be an adventurer... but at that point, it was the only thing I knew. Sticking with it was just easier. A way to keep my head down. Keep from facing reality.

But then I met Jin and the Arrivers, and I began to dream even bigger. I dreamed of becoming a top-tier adventurer and clearing the dungeon. Yet that, too, was a borrowed dream. I was dreaming vicariously through everyone else. I was simply living their dreams. I had no personal investment in the dungeon. No real reason I wanted to conquer it. So there was nothing wrong with me walking away from it, right?

I'd spent several delusional months trying to make it as a bigtime adventurer. But now it was time to wake up and face facts. I should have given up on this long ago. I should have abandoned it the moment I pulled the trash skill Mapping. Becoming an adventurer was a dream beyond my means.

I can live peacefully from now on... An ordinary life where I never have to lose anyone important to me again...

Once I reached that conclusion, things proceeded quickly from there.

I divided the belongings in my room into things I'd need from here on and things I wouldn't. Everything in the "need" pile got packed up.

What should I do with the rest? It'd be a waste to throw it all away. I guess I'll leave it here.

Next, I went downstairs to gather what belonged to me from the living room and sorted it the same way. The whole process took less than an hour. By the time I was finished, rays of sunlight were streaming through the windows.

Is it that late already? I should still be able to take the first carriage out of town if I leave now.

I departed my room and went back downstairs to the living room. The first time I'd ever set foot in here, I was shocked by the energy of the place... yet now it was eerily quiet. With half the party gone, I suppose that was only natural.

It was time for me to say goodbye to HQ. That very notion triggered something in my chest. I'd made so, so many memories here... and each one of them was irreplaceable. They were precious treasures, the likes of which could be obtained nowhere else in the world.

"Goodbye, everyone..." I muttered to myself as I turned off the lights in the living room.

I then turned for the hallway in the darkness. After several steps...

a shadow appeared in my way.

“Where do you think you’re going, Note?”

It was Roslia. How long had she been there? I hadn’t used Enemy Search for days now, so I’d had no idea she was nearby.

“Did you hear me just now?” I asked the darkness.

“Yes, I did. But even before that, I saw you were gathering your belongings in the living room. You’re leaving the Arrivers, aren’t you?”

“Yeah...”

I brushed her off and tried to walk past, but she grabbed my arm.

“Erin and Force left, and now you’re leaving too? Why didn’t you say something to me?”

“That’s...”

I didn’t have anything to say for myself. As far as I was concerned, the Arrivers had already been dissolved... so I hadn’t thought *to* tell anyone I was leaving.

“You’re lucky I noticed. What would you have done if I hadn’t?”

“Sorry...” I apologized earnestly.

She had every right to be mad, so I braced myself for a tongue lashing.

Yet she simply smiled and said in an unexpectedly light voice given the dark situation, “It’s fine. I managed to get ready in time. Shall we get going, then?”

There, I finally realized she was holding a trunk in her hands—the large kind you use on long trips. It was probably loaded with her clothes and other necessities.

“I don’t know where you’re going,” she continued, “but I’m coming along too. I won’t leave you like everyone else. Even if you don’t want me to, I’m definitely coming.”

“Roslia...”

She was still smiling, but the look in her eyes said she was dead serious. Her trembling red irises were locked on to mine.

I was at a loss for how to respond. Should I really take Roslia with me?

I hadn’t thought of anything beyond leaving Puriff yet. I wanted to get away from the dungeon, away from adventuring. I hadn’t decided where I was going to go or what I would do once I got there. I just wanted to get as far away from this place and this life as possible. Somewhere completely unrelated to the Arrivers.

That inherently meant leaving Roslia behind along with HQ... but seeing her like this made me hesitate.

Where we were standing. The way we were facing each other. What we were talking about... It all reminded me of my farewell with Erin; our positions were simply reversed. Rather than the one being

left behind, I was now the one saying goodbye.

So I understood all too painfully what she was going through right now. I'd just been through it myself, and the agony was suddenly revived all over again. My stomach turned. My fists clenched. My eyes teared up.

To say goodbye was to lose something. And losing someone precious was worse than losing a limb... I didn't care about myself. No. I'd lost so much already that I was numb.

But there was no need to hurt the girl standing before me now too. Roslia was also dealing with Jin's death, with Force and Erin's departures. Even if she was the newest member, she was still an Arriver. There was no way she wasn't affected by everything that had happened.

"I don't have anything planned, Roslia, but if you still want to come..." Before I knew it, I was muttering out loud. "I haven't decided where I'm going once I leave Puriff. I don't know what I'll do now that I've quit being an adventurer. I don't know what I'll be living for or how. Are you sure you want to come along on such a haphazard escape?"

I stared into Roslia's eyes. I was prepared for her to back off here. She had better chances of finding happiness on her own, after all. She just needed to shake her head.

But to my surprise, she beamed and nodded, emphatically declaring, "Yes!"

I realized I was smiling bitterly in spite of myself at her enthusiastic reply. Was it because I was lured by her smile, or because I was fed up with her foolishness? Perhaps a bit of both.

"Are you actually stupid or something, Roslia?"

"What? That's such a mean thing to say!"

"You'd have to be to come with me..."

Roslia was indeed a fool to follow a foolish man like me. She really had no taste in men.

"Well, let's get going," I urged.

"Yes, let's. But isn't there something we have to do first?" she asked, stopping me.

"What?"

"We have to say goodbye to Neme."

"...Now that you mention it, yeah."

Needless to say, that had completely slipped my mind.

A Promise Exchanged

The carriage bobbed up and down as we hit a rocky road, jostling us in our seats. The motion drew my dozing attention back from the scenery outside the window.

My body was completely stiff from riding in a cramped carriage for so long. I linked my hands together and stretched my arms out. There was a faint popping sound from my spine.

Roslia, who had been in a deep sleep with her head on my shoulder, groaned quietly and rubbed her eyes. I must have accidentally woken her up when I moved all of a sudden.

She stared blankly into space for a while. Then, like some switch had flipped inside her, she returned to her usual imposing self and whipped around to face me.

“Huh? Was I asleep?” she asked.

“Soundly.”

“Ah... I’ve done it now...” she groaned, clutching her head in her hands and looking down.

“It’ll be a while yet before we arrive, so why don’t you sleep some more?”

“That’s not the problem here! I’m embarrassed that you saw my sleeping face! Honestly, Note, you don’t understand women at all!”

“Huh,” I answered flatly. How was I supposed to react to that?

I gave up on saying anything at all and looked outside the window once more. Low-growing vegetation passed by from right to left. The only sounds to be heard were the whipping wind and the creaking carriage.

What peaceful scenery...

In the distance stretched a row of gray mountains—and Puriff was somewhere beyond them now. This was our fifth day on the road.

The day we left town, Roslia and I went to see Neme. We waited for her to wake up that morning, then informed her we were leaving. With half the party already gone, she’d likely anticipated it. She didn’t offer any objection.

“It’s sad, but I understand. Neme is an adult, so I won’t cry when we say goodbye.”

I wasn’t convinced crying had anything to do with being an adult, but sure enough, she didn’t shed a single tear. Just in case, I asked if she wanted to come along with us.

“That’s okay. Neme doesn’t want to get in the way of your relationship.”

She really wouldn’t have been in the way... That’s what I thought, though I never actually said it out loud.

I had no idea what was going to happen from here. Hell, maybe Neme was right and I might end up in some kind of relationship with Roslia. Things seemed to be headed in that direction, and it didn’t sound so bad. Roslia had made it clear that was what she wanted, too.

I just couldn’t imagine the future taking shape from where I stood.

Life after leaving the Arrivers, life after quitting adventuring... I won’t know where I end up until I’m there. Same goes for me and Roslia...

The unchanging scenery outside the carriage window was growing boring. I decided to give up thinking and instead try talking again.

“We’ve got another four hours before we hit the town of Mignon, right?” I asked.

“If we’re on time, yes,” Roslia replied.

“Jeez, this is taking forever.”

“But we have to go to Mignon to change carriages. We’ll have two more transfers before we reach our destination.”

“Hahh...” My shoulders slumped when I heard this report. “If I’d known it was going to take this long, I wouldn’t have suggested we go to the capital. We could have gone somewhere closer.”

“I’m not particularly set on the capital or anything. Shall we change course?”

“No, it’s fine. We’ve already come this far. Plus, ever since I was a child, I’ve always wanted to see the capital at least once.”

Glengist was the royal capital of this country. From Puriff, it was several hundred kilometers to the northeast. It was the largest city in the nation, and by far the wealthiest.

Roslia and I had gone to the carriage station in Puriff with no particular destination in mind. We just wanted to get as far away as possible... And while we were changing carriages at some point, I’d recalled how I’d always wanted to visit the royal capital. Thus I’d suggested it to Roslia, and now here we were on our way there.

“I’ve thought this for a while now, but you really seem to admire the city, Note.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I can hear it in the way you talk about it.”

“Huh. Well, I’ve told you before, right? About how I was born in a small country village called Changs? I guess big, flashy places make an impression on me.”

“Is that what it is? The countryside doesn’t sound so bad. It seems like a nice, peaceful place to live...” Roslia said wistfully, looking past me and out the window.

I turned to look the same way and slowly uttered, “A peaceful place to live, huh?”

I pondered those words. Indeed, Changs wasn’t anywhere near as hectic as Puriff. It was a peaceful place to live, just like she had said.

“What do you want to do once we reach the capital, Roslia?”

Leaving Puriff and heading to the capital were both my ideas. I hadn’t taken any of Roslia’s wishes into account. So if there was some way I could accommodate her, I wanted to know. I wanted to do everything for her that I could.

“There’s nothing in particular I want to do. I just want to live peacefully,” she said with a pensive hand to her chin before casting her eyes downward. “It’s kind of hard to say this, but I don’t want to see anyone die anymore. I don’t want to lose anyone else important to me.”

“Yeah...”

“That’s why I want to see you quit adventuring and live a safe, happy life too.”

It had now been some time since Jin’s death, but this was really the first time Roslia and I had had a serious talk since. She rarely ever revealed her true self; she had a habit of wearing a mask that made it hard to tell her jokes from the truth.

So I was a little taken aback that she was being so forthright now. Jin’s death must have affected her more than I’d realized. But the singular thought I had in the moment was that I wanted to respect her wishes.

“Okay, Roslia. I promise you—”

“You promise?” she asked, cocking her head.

I looked deep into her red eyes and replied, “I’ll never do anything like that again. No more fighting, no more adventuring. I’ll wash my hands of danger and live a safe, happy life like you want me to.”

Roslia blinked, falling silent for several seconds. She then smiled broadly.

“That’s a promise, Note. Don’t go breaking it,” she said, extending her pinky to make it official.

“I know,” I replied, locking my pinky with hers.

“I just feel like you’re going to.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“Hmm... We’ll see,” Roslia giggled, shaking our linked hands up and down.

And so we exchanged a promise as the tranquil scenery continued to pass us by.

Undoubtedly Peaceful and Happy Days

They say you can get used to anything; it just takes time.

In the beginning, it took everything I had to adjust to my new job. I was constantly second guessing whether or not I could really do it. But, sure enough, within half a year... I felt right at home.

Huh... It's already been six months since we came to the capital.

"So, where's the next delivery stop?" the man pulling the wagon asked.

"On the other side of this building," I answered, checking the address scribbled on the letter.

This was a familiar routine. It was my job now—delivering letters and packages in the capital.

Half a year ago, the first thing I'd done when Roslia and I got to the city was find a house. Once I had that secured, I went job hunting. I had funds saved up from my days with the Arrivers, but I spent most of it on our travel expenses and starting a new life.

Besides, even if I'd had more, it wouldn't have felt right *not* to work. I had to think about my future as well, so I was trying to save as much money as possible.

Fortunately, I managed to find employment right away thanks to Mapping. Skills were everything in this world. Those who had them would always excel over those who didn't in the same field. It was no exaggeration to say skills determined your lot in life.

That included how you made a living. As far as adventuring was concerned, Mapping was bottom-of-the-barrel garbage. It was a three-slot skill with absolutely no combat application whatsoever. But in terms of everyday professions... Well, that was a different story altogether.

Take the courier business, for example. With Mapping, I could easily find my deliveries without ever having to crack open a physical map. I was also constantly aware of my position in real time, so I never got lost. As a result, no one was faster with a package than me. Just one example of Mapping's value in the real world.

"Is this the place?" the man in front of the wagon asked, looking up at a beige housing complex.

This man was Hilton, by the way. He was my partner and—up until last month—the person in charge of training me. He had Minor

Physical Boost, another highly prized skill in the transport industry. He was 36 years old and married with two kids. A nice guy and a good family man. He was a brisk go-getter at work, but his wife apparently wore the pants at home.

He was always complaining during our breaks about his lack of spending money and how his family never let him rest on his days off. But in spite of what he said, he always looked pleased with himself. He seemed happy with his life. I was jealous.

"The address is on the second floor. I'll be right back," I told him, dashing up the stairs with the letter in hand.

The delivery service we worked for used couriers in pairs. One partner would pull the wagon and watch the packages while the other made the deliveries. Hilton and I divided our work based on our skills—I would guide us with Mapping while he pulled the wagon with his Physical Boost. The right man for the right job, so to speak. It worked out perfectly for both of us.

I pushed the letter through the slot in the door and returned to Hilton.

"All done. Let's head to the next stop," I reported.

"Sure thing. We're almost finished with today's deliveries, right? How many stops left?"

"Maybe six more. But they're all close by, so we'll be done soon," I answered while checking the list.

"Pairing up with you really makes this go fast, Note."

"Yeah? I wouldn't know what it's like without me, so..."

"Having someone with Mapping's a big help. There's no need for two muscleheads like me on the same team, you know? This way, I can leave the navigating to you and just focus on pulling the cart. Simple as that."

"Well, I'm also grateful to have someone strong like you for a partner. I'm a weakling, so I'm no good at pulling the wagon myself."

"You know our company is full of brawny types, so you'd have it easy no matter who you partnered up with, you know?"

"Well, yeah."

I was the only one in our company of twenty employees that had a skill like Mapping. Everyone else had Physical Boost or some other strength-enhancing skill—either that, or they were just jacked from regular old training. Like Hilton had said, brawny types. Mapping was technically a super rare skill, though, so it only stood to reason that Minor Physical Boost was more common.

"But you used to be an adventurer, right? Did you really fight monsters with these scrawny little things?" Hilton asked jokingly as he felt my arm.

"I was an adventurer, yeah, but I retired pretty quickly. Didn't

have the talent for it.”

Everyone in our company—including Hilton—knew that I used to be an adventurer. It had come up when I interviewed for the job. Of course, I’d never told anyone that I was a dungeoneer or an Arriver. I had no intention of revealing that part of my past. Besides, it wasn’t like I was lying to anyone. I really had been an adventurer. And I really hadn’t had the talent for it.

If I had... If I were stronger, Jin would still be alive. The Arrivers would still be together. Hell, we’d probably be in the dungeon right now.

I’d had big dreams of becoming a top-tier adventurer, but was forced to face the fact that I just wasn’t cut out for it. It was a common story, and now it was mine.

“Speaking of, weren’t you an adventurer once too, Hilton?” I asked, hoping to steer the conversation away from my past.

“Yeah, but that was a lifetime ago,” Hilton replied with a jovial laugh. “My tale’s not too different from yours, Note. I realized my limits and decided to quit. I was also on the verge of getting married at the time, so I also wanted a stable income.”

My experience was so ordinary that it seemed everyone had been through it. Losing someone wasn’t uncommon, either. I’d heard plenty of sob stories about parties disbanding after the death of a member. Everyone gives up on their dreams and goes their separate ways because of it.

So at the end of the day, I wasn’t special. I was just another adventurer who’d had their dreams shattered. Just another normal guy...

It made a dull but easy job like this tolerable for me.

“Good work out there, Hilton, Note.”

When we returned to the office, the receptionist greeted us cheerfully. She wore the uniform-standard white dress shirt and black skirt, as well as a bright, wine red cardigan that clearly broke the company dress code. Her name was Monah, and she’d worked here for the past three years.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“We’re all done for the day,” Hilton reported.

There, Monah got up from her seat and approached us.

“Since you two are back so early and there’s still some time yet before the end of the day, why not go for another round?” she said, pointing behind the counter at a huge pile of packages.

It was currently 4:30 in the afternoon—still a little too early to head home for the day, but going out for another run would keep us until well past six o’clock. We’d apparently finished up *too* quickly today. If I’d managed our time better, we could’ve come back right

around five. With a sigh of defeat, I headed for the stack of packages...

But then Hilton said, "I, uh... just remembered it's my daughter's birthday. I gotta head straight home, so there's no way I can stay overtime."

He was blatantly, if not impressively, monotone. He was clearly joking around. Monah knew that as well as I did.

"Hilton, how often does your daughter have a birthday?" she demanded, her eyes narrowed. "This is the tenth one this year!"

Does he really use the excuse that often? This is only my third time hearing it...

I stopped to observe their comical exchange. Hilton clapped his hands together, begging as he bowed his head to Monah.

"Please! You gotta let me off the hook just this once!" he continued.

"What are you on about? I swear..." There, she sighed and turned to me. "Make sure you don't become a pathetic adult like this, Note."

"You're so harsh, Monah..." Hilton whined.

"I'll allow it just for today," she replied with a teasing waggle of her finger. "So pack up and get out of here already."

This left Hilton and I both in wide-eyed surprise.

"Thank you, Monah!" Hilton cheered.

"Are you sure?" I asked, peering at the mountain of packages.

"Don't worry. Those are all scheduled to go out tomorrow, so there's no real rush. Plus, you have to leave early today as well, don't you?"

"That's right! It's my daughter's birthday—"

"Not you, Hilton! I'm talking about Note!" Monah looked at me with a grin. "It's the weekend, right? Surely you have a fancy date planned with your girlfriend!"

It was true I had a regular date at the end of every workweek. Seemed everyone knew about it now, too. I had to correct Monah on one point, though.

"She's not my girlfriend."

"What?! You're *still* not going out yet?! You've gotta be kidding me! She's so cute, too... What was her name again? Rosa?"

"Roslia," I answered curtly.

My coworkers knew about Roslia. I'd once had to work overtime on our date night, so she came to find me when I didn't show up. And ever since, everyone at the office seemed to be under the impression she was my girlfriend. It wasn't uncommon for them to tease me like this, either.

"That's right! Cute little Roslia!" Monah nodded. Then, a grin still plastered on her face, she wheedled, "But you've just *got* to be dating, right? You go on dates every weekend!"

“Really, we’re not dating.”

“Seriously?! I know she’s interested! Hurry up and ask her out already!”

“Stop it. We both have our reasons.”

“What are you acting all cool for? Are you sure you’re not just being a coward?”

“I’m not some kid, okay? That’s not what this is about.”

“Then what is it about?”

“That’s personal.”

“Fine, whatever. But you should hurry up and make a move before some other man steals her away. Roslia’s a real catch, after all. I bet there are lots of guys eyeing her.”

“Monah’s right! You can’t let a beauty like her get away,” Hilton finally joined in.

I’m sure the two of them felt like they were giving me advice, but it was honestly a little annoying. They didn’t know anything about me or Roslia, or what we’d been through. Not that it would change anything if I told them... so I didn’t bother to explain.

“Like I said, we have our reasons. I’ll consider it when the time comes. You don’t need to worry,” I assured them vaguely.

“Note sure does things at his own pace,” Monah sighed.

“He just needs some courage,” Hilton said with a sage nod.

There, they exchanged a knowing look.

“You have to put yourself out there to win a girl over, you know?”

“If you’re waiting for her to confess first, you’ll never become lovers!”

I really wished they’d knock it off... I glanced up at the clock, hoping this tiresome conversation would be over soon. At that point, I checked out and didn’t really listen to anything else they said.

The capital was much colder than Puriff—not to mention Broad or Changs. I’d never worn a coat or muffler before coming here. It was also the first time in my life I’d ever had to wear gloves. I wasn’t exactly used to it yet.

I waited an uncomfortable twenty minutes or so under the streetlight. While I was mindlessly kneading the tufted ends of my muffler between my hands, a woman waved to me from down the street.

It was Roslia. She was wearing a familiar long, beige coat with a white fur collar and matching hat. I gingerly raised my hand in response. She rushed over to me, slightly out of breath.



“Sorry to keep you waiting, Note...”

“I wasn’t here long. Don’t worry.”

“Really?”

“Really. Did work run late?”

“Yes. An important guest is coming tomorrow for worship, so we had to prepare.”

Roslia was currently working at the local church. She was officially a nun’s aide, which involved looking after the orphaned children and healing the injured with holy spells.

“I ran all the way here. I’m a little heated,” Roslia confessed, fanning her face.

“You are pretty bundled up, but I’m sure you’ll cool off in this frigid weather.”

“It’s even colder than usual today. I wonder if it’ll snow.”

“Snow, huh?” I muttered to myself, trying to imagine it. “I’ve never seen the real deal before. Just the magic kind and the stuff in the dungeon. What about you, Roslia?”

“It used to snow in my hometown. I was still a kid back then, so I made snowmen every year when it did.”

“So even you were an innocent kid once, huh?”

“Like I said, I was just a sweet little girl back then.”

“So there’s no way you would make snowmen now?”

“Do you want to make one?”

“Yeah, actually.” Feeling embarrassed, I turned away. “I just want to try it once in my life. Making a snowman, I mean.”

“Then let’s make one together. There’s no rule that says you can’t after a certain age.”

“Oh yeah? I mean, that’s fine with me.”

“Why don’t we have a snowball fight while we’re at it? Those are pretty fun too.”

“Can you have a real snowball fight with just two people? That doesn’t seem like much of a fight.”

“Oh, the battle starts the moment the first snowball is thrown—regardless of the number of combatants. There are no real rules since you’re just playing around, anyway,” Roslia explained as she pantomimed lobbing a snowball.

“Okay, okay. We’ll talk more once it actually snows. Can we go eat already? It’s freezing out here.”

“You’re sure sensitive to the cold, Note. I feel just fine.”

“That’s because you got warm running, whereas I’ve been standing out here in the bitter cold.”

“Huh? You said you weren’t waiting long...”

“Oh, yeah... That’s right,” I conceded, having forgotten my own

cover story.

"If you're going to tell white lies, don't backpedal on them. You're just making me feel bad."

"Sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? I was the one who made you wait in the cold."

"But it wasn't your fault you were running late, right? You're not to blame."

"That may be, but..."

"All right, enough talking. Let's get a move on already," I said, beckoning to her as I started to walk.

Roslia quickly caught up to me and eagerly asked, "Where are we eating tonight?"

"It's cold, so how about hot pot? There's a shop I've been wanting to check out."

"Sounds good. I could go for something warm."

A man and a woman sharing an intimate dinner together would probably look like a couple to anyone... That's what I was thinking as I fished a meatball out of our cloudy soup pot and set it on my plate.

Roslia and I had been on dozens of dates like this since moving to the city. We went out twice a week—once during the workweek, and again when we had our day off together. This was a regular occurrence for us.

Right now, the two of us were living separately. That was something we'd agreed upon when we first arrived in the capital and went house hunting. We could have moved in together, but living with Roslia would have only reminded me of our time back at HQ... and everything painful that came with it.

So for the time being, to forget it all, I'd told her that I needed my space. That was why I'd suggested living apart in the first place, and Roslia had been surprisingly on board with the idea. I'd had a whole list of excuses prepared just in case, so I was almost a little let down.

But in exchange, Roslia had demanded one concession—these dates. She wanted to meet up at least once a week, which was fine with me. The only problem was that I'd be breaking my promise to her if something suddenly came up and I had to miss a night... so we now met up twice a week just in case.

Yet even after so many dates, Roslia and I still weren't dating. That was on me, of course. I just couldn't bring myself to take the plunge.

Roslia was essentially my last connection to the Arrivers. Without her, I would have been completely free of my old life. There would've been nothing binding me to my past.

That was what scared me about moving my relationship with her

forward. The deeper we got involved, the more time we spent together... the more old memories resurfaced, and they were just as vivid as they'd been six months ago.

There was also Erin... She'd said she loved me before she left, but now I'd fled to the capital with no intention of returning to Puriff. We'd probably never see each other again, yet I still had lingering feelings for her.

I'd considered leaving that regret unsettled and dating Roslia anyway, but that felt like it would be unfair to the girl who'd left everything behind to follow me here. Though I guess continuing to see her like this with our relationship in limbo was equally unfair.

"How is it? Good?" I asked Roslia, who was stuffing her cheeks with vegetables.

She finished chewing and swallowed before answering leisurely, "It's delicious. Hot pot really is the best in winter."

"I'm glad you like it."

I sipped at my soup, savoring the rich flavor on my tongue. Roslia then turned the same question back at me.

"What about you, Note? Is it to your liking?"

"Yup, I think it's great," I answered quietly.

"Really?" she said with a pout. "You don't look like you're enjoying it."

"Really?" I asked, cocking my head. I liked it enough that I was already thinking about coming back here sometime, so Roslia's observation struck me as odd. "Am I really that expressionless?"

"Not expressionless, exactly," Roslia replied evasively. She then looked around as if trying to find the right words. "This might sound rude, but..."

"It's okay. Go ahead and say it."

"You've stopped smiling since we came to the capital, Note," Roslia said, looking into my eyes. "That's not explicitly a bad thing. I mean, it's not like you're emotionless. I see you force yourself every now and then."

"Does it really count if it's forced?"

"I still have fun with you, and it's not like I'm complaining or anything. It's not, like, something you should be worried about," she continued, waving her hands in a fluster. "It's just that you've stopped smiling with all your heart like you used to. It's a little sad."

Hearing that, I had to agree. It was true that I smiled a lot less these days, although I didn't think I'd stopped altogether. Roslia had tried to soften the blow by saying "since we came to the capital," but I knew that it had really been since Jin died and the Arrivers dissolved.

Those wounds hadn't healed in half a year's time. I couldn't deny that my heart was still raw—especially not to Roslia. All I could do

was apologize in earnest.

"I'm sorry."

"I wasn't asking for an apology, Note. I don't dislike this side of you, you know? You have sort of a calm, mature charm now. It's so grown-up."

"Hearing that from someone older than me just makes it feel like you're teasing me."

"I'm not. I'm being serious."

"If you're going to say that, then I think you're far more mature than I am. You're considerate of others and you know how to defuse just about any situation with a joke. You're the real adult here."

"You know, it's kind of embarrassing to have someone say that to your face..."

"Right? So stop doing it to me."

"That's different!" There, the blushing Roslia cleared her throat. "We've gotten a little off topic here. What I mean to say is that I worry about you sometimes, Note."

"Why?"

"You just don't seem to have fun anymore. I'm afraid you're not satisfied with your current life."

"Satisfied...?"

I hardly knew what to say. Of course I was satisfied with my current life. I got to go out with a cute girl twice a week. I had a stable job with nosy but friendly coworkers. Every day was peaceful, unlike before. This was the ideal happiness everyone chased. Being unsatisfied with it would just make me greedy. I'd probably incur some divine wrath if I asked for anything more than this.

"I'm totally satisfied right now, so don't worry," I finally said out loud, as though I was trying to convince myself. "Getting to shoot the breeze with you like this is the best."

It's not like I was lying. Seeing Roslia really was the highlight of my week.

"Really? Then I guess things are fine..." she mumbled.

"Let me ask you this instead. Do you have fun being with me, Roslia? There's not much I can do for you, you know."

"I'm having plenty of fun. I finally have you all to myself."

"There you go again, joking around like that... Just how many men have fallen for those sweet words of yours?"

"Isn't that a mean way to respond to someone who's really opening their heart to you?" Roslia demanded, puffing out her cheeks in furious protest.

"I know, I know. I was kidding."

"It was still mean."

"I was too self-conscious to reply seriously. Just think of it as a

cute way of hiding my embarrassment.”

“It’s not cute at all when you say it like that...” she continued to pout, narrowing her eyes in a glare. “And please just forget about how I used to be. That’s all in the past.”

“After all the trouble you caused for others, you can’t just sweep it under the rug as ‘all in the past.’”

“But I feel terrible about it now... I’ve had a change of heart. It’s not the past that matters, but the here and now, right?!”

“I suppose that’s true...”

It’s not the past that matters, but the here and now, huh?

Roslia’s words lingered in my ear. That was a good line. Surely she had the right idea. Dragging the past behind you would never lead to happiness. The important thing was facing the future by living in the moment.

“Is something the matter?” Roslia asked, peering at my face as I was awash in a sea of thoughts.

“Nothing,” I said, hurriedly waving my hand with feigned composure. “I was just thinking that was a good line.”

“What was?”

“It’s not the past that matters, but the here and now.”

“Really? Sounds pretty commonplace to me...”

“Maybe, but I still needed to hear it. I need to get over the past myself.”

The fact I had to voice my resolution out loud like this meant that I still wasn’t over it yet. I was satisfied with my life now; I couldn’t deny that. So what was this unsettled feeling deep within my heart? What was I still missing that prevented me from living in the present?

I was unable to find that answer again today.

The Snowy City

“Aww man, Note, listen to this,” Hilton suddenly said in the middle of a delivery.

“What happened?” I asked from beside him as he pulled the wagon.

“I had a fried egg for breakfast, and I was saving the yolk for last... but then I dropped it.”

“That’s unfortunate,” I said disinterestedly, unsure what the point of this story was.

“Hang on. That’s not all,” he interjected. “Just before I left the house, I noticed I was wearing odd socks. It nearly made me late. Then, once I finally got outside, I stepped in a puddle and soaked my shoes. It’s been the worst day.”

“‘The worst’ seems like a bit of an exaggeration. Sounds like you’ve just been a little unlucky to me.”

“You think?”

“To say it’s *the worst* means it can’t get any worse. But you can live with wet shoes, can’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Hilton mused, nodding. “Anyway, I can’t help feeling like this dark cloud is gonna keep following me. Sorry if my bad luck rubs off on you!”

“What? Maybe I should keep my distance from you today...” I said, grabbing a letter out of the wagon and walking away.

“Hey, don’t be like that! You’ll hurt an old man’s feelings!”

I was only going to put the letter in a mailbox, but it seemed Hilton thought I was really trying to get away from him. He left the wagon behind to come chasing after me.

“I was just kidding, Hilton. Please don’t leave the wagon unattended. We can’t let anything get stolen,” I scolded him as I turned back when I was done.

“Who would even steal letters, though? It’s not like there’s any money in it.”

“Maybe not. But what if there was a letter containing state secrets and some enemy spy was out to steal it?”

“Come on, that would never happen.”

“I know I’m the one that suggested it... but, yeah, I don’t think it would happen either.”

“Then don’t say such silly stuff in the first place.”

“Fair point...”

I scratched my head and looked around. We were currently on a main road that ran toward the north side of the capital. It was known for being a ghost town, even in the middle of the day.

“Still, I’ve heard this area isn’t very safe,” I remarked.

“Really? I’ve lived in the capital for years and I’ve never heard anyone say that.”

“I don’t mean to say it’s dangerous, but haven’t there been a lot of incidents around here lately? That’s what Roslia told me, anyway.”

“Your girlfriend, huh?”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

Hilton and I continued to walk our route, chatting idly about this and that. Then, all of a sudden...

“Th-Thief!” someone yelled from down the road in broad daylight.

I turned to see an elderly woman fallen on her backside. Just past her was a man bolting away with a purse in his hands.

“I can’t believe we’re actually witnessing a purse snatching right after I said this place was unsafe. Hilton, you really are unlucky today.”

“Now’s not the time to be joking around, Note! We gotta go after him!”

“Are you serious?”

“Of course I am! What else would we do?”

For real? He seriously wants to chase the guy?

“What are we supposed to do about the packages, then?” I asked, pointing at our haul of undelivered mail.

I wasn’t exactly the kind of guy who’d just rush into trouble to help a stranger. I had to weigh the risks first. Hilton, however, was the exact opposite.

“Forget the packages! If we don’t hurry, we’ll lose him!” he shouted as he let go of the wagon and turned to me.

“And what are you going to do if you catch him? Fight him?” I asked in return.

“The goal is to subdue him, not fight him.”

“If he’s a thieving lowlife, he very well may be carrying a weapon. He might have combat skills, too. It’s too dangerous to pursue him ourselves.”

“What are you so afraid of? Didn’t you used to be an adventurer? Be a man, will ya?!”

“Being a man won’t stop something from going wrong, and it’ll be too late once it does. Think about it, Hilton. You have a family. Let’s just call the city guards.”

“Argh, there’s no getting anywhere with you! If you’re not coming, then I’m going by myself! You can wait here and watch over

the packages!”

Hilton looked like he was about to dash off, so I grabbed his hand in a panic.

“What are you doing, Note? Don’t try to stop me!” he shouted.

“I’m not,” I replied. “Since you won’t knock it off, I’m going with you. Just calm down first.”

I’d promised Roslia on the carriage ride here that I wouldn’t do anything dangerous anymore. I wanted to avoid sticking my neck out if at all possible, but Hilton was forcing my hand. I couldn’t just let him run off on his own... If something happened to him, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself. I couldn’t make the same mistake I had with Jin.

“There’s no time for that!” he kept shouting. “We need to go after him, and *now*!”

“We don’t need to chase him,” I said, wondering to myself how long it had been since I’d last used an art.

For maximum coverage, I activated Enemy Search with all the concentration I could muster.

There he is!

I burned the purse snatcher’s presence into my brain. Now I wouldn’t lose track of him as long as he stayed within range of my Enemy Search, even if he tried to blend into a crowd. Fortunately, his threat level wasn’t very high. I could roughly tell via Enemy Search that he was slightly weaker than Hilton, a former adventurer.

That being the case, Hilton probably would’ve been fine on his own. Granted, that was only if the purse snatcher didn’t have a weapon or comrades with him. Hilton also couldn’t track the thief without me, so I had to go with him anyway.

“What are you saying, Note?! Of course we have to chase him!” Hilton snapped harshly, seeming pretty close to losing his cool.

“I just meant we don’t have to rush,” I said to calm him down. “I’m sorry I didn’t explain better. I’m trying to say we can take this slow and steady.”

“We’ll lose track of him that way.”

“Actually, I have a kind of unique ability. I can track the people around me, so I already know exactly where he is.”

“Really?”

“Really. So let’s follow him carefully.”

“I’ve never heard of an ability like that before...”

“It’s a little annoying to explain the specifics, but in short, it’s a combination of my Mapping skill and a specialized art.”

Ignoring the surprised look Hilton was giving me, I ran over to the fallen woman. There was something I had to ask her before we got into the thick of this.

“We’re going to go get your purse back, ma’am, so could you watch over that wagon for us and make sure no one takes anything?”

I watched the purse snatcher saunter down a deserted alleyway alone. He was a tall, skinny guy in his twenties with a slightly hunched back. He held his jacket clutched tightly closed in front of him with a rather obvious bulge under his hands. Seemed that’s where he was hiding the purse.

Hilton was in position at the other end of the alley. We’d prepared a pincer attack for the thief, who’d yet to notice us. I knew I was in the clear because I had Stealth active, but Hilton had just been lucky enough to go undetected. There was no one else in the area, so we were safe to make a move without dragging any bystanders into this. So far, so good.

The thief made it about halfway down the alley before Hilton leaped out at him as planned. I took my cue and stepped out too.

“Stop, thief! Return the purse you stole!” Hilton hollered, making the guy flinch.

The thief then whipped around in a panic, only to find that I was blocking his exit. When he realized escape was impossible, he turned back to Hilton.

“Who are you people, coming out of nowhere and accusing me of stealing? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t try to play dumb! We saw you snatch that purse with our own eyes!”

“Ah, so you’re the delivery men who were there... You must have a lotta time on your hands to come after me.”

“We wouldn’t have to do this if you hadn’t stolen anything! Now hand it over!”

“Don’t go sticking your nose in other people’s business, gents. What good, law-abiding citizens you are... But if you don’t wanna get hurt, you should get out of the way now,” the thief threatened, but Hilton didn’t back down. He slowly approached one, then two steps. “Shit!”

The thief pretended to throw the purse, but it was a feint. He quickly stuffed it back inside his jacket and made a mad dash for Hilton. He jumped up for a roundhouse kick when he got close, and Hilton didn’t even bother trying to evade it. He simply raised his left arm in front of his face to block the attack. He then used his right arm to clothesline the guy.

“Take that, thief!”

Hilton knocked the guy back with such force that he rolled along the ground before hitting the alley wall. As expected of someone with Minor Physical Boost, of course. It was a fairly common skill, so

people tended not to think much of it, but it had extraordinary applications in combat—both offensive and defensive.

See, Physical Boost increased one's fortitude along with their strength. As Hilton had just demonstrated, it allowed those blessed with it to use their bodies like shields. People with the skill were tougher, heartier, and generally harder to kill. It didn't grant specialized combat prowess like Sword Mastery did, but in some cases the raw power of Physical Boost was even more useful.

Yet even so, a single blow from Hilton still wasn't enough to knock the thief out. He was immediately back on his feet and backing away. He then threw the purse to the ground. It seemed he'd determined that it would be too difficult to fight while holding it... and in its place, he drew a small knife from his breast pocket. I could see the silver glint of its blade as the thief pointed it at Hilton.

"Step aside, old man, or you'll regret getting in my way!" he threatened.

Brandishing a weapon immediately gave him the upper hand. Hilton recognized that and warily took a step back.

"I said move!" the thief continued to yell. He lurched forward like he was about to charge right at Hilton... then turned on his heels, grabbed the purse, and dashed toward me. "Ha! Sucker!"

Yeah, go figure...

The thief had already tried his luck with Hilton once and been overpowered. Of course he'd opt to take his chances with me instead now. When he saw I wasn't moving out of the way, however, he shouted...

"Serpentine!"

I hadn't expected him to use an art. I froze in surprise for a moment as the winding knife came straight for me.

Fortunately, though, I'd sensed his intent to attack for some time now thanks to Enemy Search. This wasn't much of an attack, either. Compared to Jin, this guy practically moved in slow motion.

"Stream."

I slammed my wrist under the thief's hand, then used my momentum to run my entire arm under his body. I stooped farther and farther forward, redirecting his center of gravity lower and lower. Once his chest was across my back, I grabbed the arm he was holding the knife with and swept his right foot—the one he had his weight on—out from under him.



I then pitched him in a shoulder throw... straight into the ground. I took the opportunity to kick the knife out of his hand, sending it skidding down the alley.

“Hraaargh!”

Hilton brought both his hands down together on the back of the fallen thief’s head. No one stood a chance against a direct hit like that from someone with Physical Boost. The thief slumped over weakly, knocked out cold. All we had to do now was call the city guards to come arrest him.

“Well, that worked out somehow,” Hilton said as I picked up the purse. “Though I gotta admit I broke into a cold sweat when he whipped out that knife.”

“I’m just glad we’re both unharmed,” I replied, glancing over at the blade on the ground.

“What was that, anyway?” Hilton asked, shooting me a dubious look. “That art, I mean. I had no idea what was happening.”

“You mean Serpentine? If I recall correctly, it’s a thief art. I’ve only ever seen other adventurers use it, so I don’t know much about it.”

“No, not that one. The one you used. Stream, was it?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s it.”

“I’ve never seen that one before. Were you actually some amazing adventurer or something, Note?”

“You’ve really never seen it before? It’s nothing special. Either way, I’m glad things worked out. Lucky break, huh?” I replied with a bitter smile. I didn’t want him prying any further into my past, so I decided to change the subject. “But your luck really is terrible today, Hilton. We’re nowhere near done with our deliveries, so we’re definitely gonna be working overtime tonight.”

“Crap... I totally forgot about that. But who cares, y’know? We managed to help out someone in need, after all,” Hilton said, scratching his head awkwardly as an earnest, pure smile crossed his face.

I had to respect the guy. He was genuinely kind. Righteous, even. Completely unlikely me, who was kind of annoyed with the whole affair. Even though we’d helped someone, I’d broken my promise to Roslia. I’d told her I wouldn’t do anything dangerous anymore, yet here I was risking my life for a perfect stranger.

And worse yet, when that man came running at me... I was filled with elation. Peril was charging my way, but it made my heart soar—something that should have *never* happened. When Jin died, I was done with adventure. I was done with danger. I was done with fighting.

Yet in that moment, I'd truly felt alive. Like I was liberated from my boring everyday life. I knew it was foolish to think that way, but I couldn't help the feeling... and it was addictive.

No, it just revived memories of a time I had once been addicted to it. Memories of my time with the Arrivers. Of the days I spent thinking of nothing but clearing the dungeon. It was almost like... It was almost like the happiness I'd felt back then was within my grasp again.

If I'd known this is how it would make me feel, I never would've helped anyone...

"Yeah, I guess... It feels nice to lend a hand for a change," I said insincerely to Hilton as I continued to ponder what I'd done.

*

For several days afterward, I was unable to forget the sensation.

My fight with the purse snatcher had only lasted a moment, but I longed to relive that moment. That anxious desire welled up in me whenever I had a moment to myself between deliveries or got lost in thought while someone was talking. I'd get sudden flashbacks of that unadulterated elation...

And I wasn't just zoning out with Hilton or Monah at work, either. I was also doing it with Roslia on our date nights.

"Then I said, 'The Nubediyans are coming!'"

"Uh-huh..."

"And the children all screamed in terror. Honestly, kids are the best."

"Yeah..."

"What's with those responses, Note? Are you even listening to me?"

It seemed my distraction was a bit obvious. Roslia crossed her arms and gave me a dirty look. She was in the middle of some story about the children at the church... and I totally wasn't paying attention. I reached back in my memory for the last thing I recalled her saying.

"The Nubediyans explode green, right?"

"That's what I said at the start, yeah. You really haven't been listening all this time, have you?"

"Sorry..."

I'd apparently missed the point of the story, which put an even more stern look on Roslia's face. What kind of story began with a Nubediyans exploding green anyway? I didn't even know what a Nubediyans was... I was kind of curious now, actually, but Roslia was on to a different subject.

"What's the matter, Note? You're acting like you've got something on your mind."

“Am I?”

“You are. Do you have a fever or something?”

There, Roslia placed her right hand against my forehead. She then moved it between mine and hers to check my temperature.

“You don’t feel warm, but it has gotten bitter out lately. Make sure you don’t catch a cold.”

“Yeah...”

The fever that had seized me wasn’t a cold. I knew that better than anyone... but I didn’t have the heart to confess my true sickness to Roslia. I’d broken the promise I’d made her on the way to the capital, after all.

I’d told her I would live here safely without putting myself in harm’s way, yet I’d gone and chased down a purse snatcher. If that had been all, things would have been fine. It was just one extraneous incident beyond my control. The real betrayal was the unshakable desire I had to do it again...

In order to avoid hurting Roslia, I had to keep it under wraps.

I remained silent for a while after that, eventually prompting Roslia to say, “It’s a little early, but let’s call it a night, Note. You really do seem a bit under the weather.”

“I’d feel bad leaving you, though. It’s not like I’m sick or anything.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’d feel worse making you push yourself when you’re not feeling well.”

Insisting on staying when she didn’t want to would make me feel just as bad... So instead of worrying her more, I decided to go home and pull myself together for our next date night.

“Thanks. And sorry about tonight, Roslia.”

“It’s fine. Everyone has their off days. Hit the hay early and rest up, okay?”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Let’s get out of here, then.”

We gathered our belongings and called the waiter over to pay the bill. When I opened the restaurant door, a frigid gust of wind blew in from outside.

“It’s so cold...”

“This is the kind of weather that keeps people indoors.”

“I’d much rather stay all nice and warm and cozy at home myself.”

The bitter cold enveloped us both as we stepped out into it. Roslia rubbed her gloved hands against her cheeks and looked up at the sky.

“It might snow soon.”

“Do you think it will tonight?” I asked.

The sky was cloaked in a thick layer of clouds that hid even the

moon, making it a dark and quiet night. I'd never seen it snow before, but this seemed like the perfect atmosphere for it.

"I think so," she replied.

"I hope it starts while we're together. Then we can make snowmen."

"You can't play in it right when it starts snowing. It's best the day after, when it's all piled up."

"You have work tomorrow, right?"

"Yes. You have the day off though, don't you?"

"Yeah, so I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

I had the next two days off, but Roslia still had to work tomorrow. We'd planned to meet up the day after on our mutual day off for our next date night.

"Do you think we'll have snow by then?" I asked.

"Can't say for sure. Depends on if it starts tonight or not."

The two of us walked down the road illuminated by the bluish-white glow of the streetlights. The number of restaurants along the way slowly dwindled, replaced by houses as we entered the residential district. It was darker and quieter here, away from all the lights and people. Roslia and I kept walking until we reached a familiar T-intersection.

"It's a little sad, but I guess this is where we part ways. I had lots of fun tonight, Note. Thank you."

"Same. See you, Roslia."

I raised my hand in a casual wave. She waved her arm enthusiastically in return.

"Make sure you get to bed early!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Roslia continued to wave as she went, soon disappearing between the shadows of houses. I turned my gaze back to the cold stone street and started walking again, my footsteps echoing through the surrounding area.

Snow, huh?

I couldn't help wondering how the city would look covered in the stuff. I hadn't realized how much I was looking forward to seeing it.

"Guess I'll take the long way."

If it was going to snow, I wanted to see it. There was no guarantee it would start on my way home, but I figured I'd at least increase my chances by taking a little detour. The scenic route, if you will.

Roslia had told me to get to sleep early, but it wasn't like I was really sick. I didn't need to worry about following her instructions to the letter. I felt a little bad *not* listening to her, but my curiosity won out over my guilt.

And so I wandered my way down an unfamiliar street. I hadn't

come this way before, but it looked well maintained and well lit. Must've been a newly built-up part of town. There were definitely more people here.

I could see a man in a top hat who walked with his head held high. A grandmother and her two roughly ten-year-old grandsons. A wealthy gentleman dressed in all white. A middle-aged man with a large broadsword walking alongside a beautiful young woman with soft curls...

My eyes stopped on the man with the broadsword.

"Huh?!" I shouted reflexively.

The man seemed just as surprised as I was. The girl by his side went wide-eyed too. I opened and closed my mouth uselessly a few times before finally finding the words...

"Hugel...? Is that you...?"

"Note?!"

When I heard his voice, I knew for sure it was him. Hugel, otherwise known as the Headhunter, was said to be the strongest man in the country. His specialty was using Stealth to sneak up on his targets and behead them before they knew what was happening. He was a deadly assassin... but he was also a peculiar one who dedicated himself to hunting down bad guys. A so-called "hitman for justice."

I'd met him back when I was in the Arrivers. He was trying to kill Jin at the time, but Riece and I had managed to stop him. He'd quietly departed Puriff after the fact, but I'd never dreamed I would run into him here.

"What are you doing in the capital?" I asked.

"I should be asking you that. This is where I live," he replied.

Ah, of course. The Headhunter's based out of the capital. He was just in Puriff on business...

"So, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"It's a long story..."

I dodged the question out of habit—one I'd developed with my coworkers—but when I stopped to think about it, Hugel already knew about my past. He knew I was an Arriver, and he could easily find out what had happened. Since Jin was once a target of his, he might even know already...

So, figuring there was no point in trying to hide the truth, I copped to it.

"Actually, I quit adventuring."

"Oh? But why? I really thought you were coming into your own."

"Yeah, I thought so too... but no luck. The Arrivers have disbanded."

"Disbanded? Did something happen?"

It seemed he didn't know about Jin's death after all. It would have

been weird to clam up after saying as much as I had already, so I told it to him straight.

“Jin died in the dungeon after you left.”

“Th-That’s...”

Hugel was speechless. I had no idea how he felt upon hearing about the death of a former target—someone he’d chosen not to kill. Was he happy that he was dead now? Or maybe sorry that he hadn’t gone through with the assassination after all?

“I guess it’s good news for you, Hugel,” I said with a shrug.

“Hardly. I was genuinely looking forward to your future as an adventurer. That’s why I let Jin go.”

“It was all for naught, then. Sorry to let you down,” I spat in self-mockery.

Suddenly, the woman with Hugel caught my eye. She’d been quiet all this time, so I’d completely overlooked the fact that she was even here.

“Sorry, I forgot your girlfriend was with you... I won’t say any more.”

Hugel’s identity as the Headhunter was a secret. I was glad I hadn’t called him by that name specifically, but there was still a lot that could be intuited from our conversation. I was ready to bring it to a quick close out of consideration for Hugel’s female companion, but she suddenly spoke up, to my surprise...

“Girlfriend?! Did you hear that, Master Hugel?!”

“Don’t worry,” Hugel assured me. “She already knows that I’m the Headhunter. Also, don’t get the wrong idea. This is my assistant, Eisha. She’s not my girlfriend, so let’s get that part straight or else I’ll feel sorry for her.”

“You didn’t have to go that far, Master Hugel...”

“Hmm? Did you say something, Eisha?”

“No, nothing!” Eisha yelled, waving her arms in a fluster before turning to me. “It’s nice to meet you. Like Master Hugel said, I’m Eisha. As his right hand, I handle all of the Headhunter’s job requests. I’m also in charge of intelligence.”

There, Eisha bowed her head politely. At a glance, she was a rather fetching girl who appeared to be in her early twenties. She had golden curls and big eyes that made her look like a doll. She had a great figure too, which stood out even under her sweater.

“Ever since Master Hugel saved my life,” she continued, “I’ve dedicated myself to serving him. I’ll never be able to repay the debt I owe him.”

“I saved you of my own accord, so you needn’t feel indebted to me,” Hugel replied bluntly in his low voice.

“But I’ve stayed with you all this time because I *want* to be with

you, Master Hugel,” Eisha objected, leaning forward adamantly.



“There you go again, saying such things... Don’t you think you should live your life how you please, Eisha?”

“How dense...”

What was with this exchange? Just listening to it was infuriating. Eisha clearly had romantic feelings for Hugel, who was absolutely oblivious. *I* was starting to feel sorry for her.

“You sure have it tough, Miss Eisha. I had no idea Hugel was so obtuse...” I sighed.

“I know!” she squeaked in agreement. She then leaned in close and whispered in my ear, “He’s always like this! Could you help him realize my feelings, Mr. Stranger-Whose-Name-I-Don’t-Know-Yet?”

“Oh, I’m Note. But I don’t know that I can really help...” First and foremost, I had no romantic experience. Second, there was a huge hurdle in Eisha’s way. “I mean, Hugel only likes little girls, so...”

“Ah, so you know that already?” There, she folded her arms and launched into a rant: “I figured that was the holdup. When the Headhunter saved me, I was just ten years old... but I felt my heart flutter.”

I hadn’t asked her to spill the whole story, yet here we were.

“After that, I spent several years polishing myself into a mature woman fit to be the Headhunter’s partner... And when my transformation is finally complete, I find out he prefers little girls instead. How heartbreaking, right? If I had known, I wouldn’t have bothered trying to become an adult! I would’ve run to him straight away!”

What a truly sad story. I was feeling more and more sorry for Eisha by the second.

“Sorry to interrupt your tale, but do you mind if I ask you something?” I said, casting a quick glance at Hugel.

“Not at all,” replied Eisha.

“I’m impressed that you knew Hugel was the Headhunter. He keeps his identity a secret, right? So how did you manage to find him?”

“Determination!” Eisha exclaimed with a grin, holding up a demonstrative finger.

That’s kind of terrifying... Talk about grim determination.

“Eisha is a thief who’s mastered the art of intelligence gathering,” Hugel explained, joining the conversation. “I doubt there’s anyone in the nation who could best her in that department. If she had to, she could even get to the bottom of a crime that royalty tried to cover up. It’s no exaggeration to say she’s the brains of the Headhunter’s operation.”

“Aww, shucks!” Eisha giggled happily at the Headhunter’s praise.

“So, how does Note know you’re the Headhunter?” Eisha asked Hugel, pointing at me.

“I know I’ve told you about him before. This is the thief boy who forced me to back down from taking out Jin of the Arrivers. His mastery of detection makes him the only person who can track my incredible Stealth.”

I was honestly nowhere near as impressive as Hugel was making me sound, so I just bowed my head a little as he spoke.

“Oh, so this is *that* Note. It really is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, then. Master Hugel has said nothing but good things about you, so I’ve always wanted to meet you myself.”

“Really? I think Hugel’s overestimated me quite a bit. I’m no one special.”

“That can’t be true. Master Hugel rarely ever speaks so highly of someone,” Eisha said with a nod before clapping her hands together. “I know! Let’s take this conversation inside instead of standing out in the cold. Would you like to come to our place, Note? That’d be all right, wouldn’t it, Master Hugel?”

“Of course. I’d love to have Note over myself. Our house is right nearby, so why don’t you drop by for a bit?”

“But...” I hesitated.

The promise I’d made to Roslia flashed through the back of my mind. I’d told her I’d put being an adventurer behind me. Getting too involved with someone I knew from the old days couldn’t be a good idea, although it wasn’t like just talking to him would be betraying Roslia...

I would’ve refused under ordinary circumstances, but there was a part of me that wanted to keep talking to Hugel. I wanted to hear more about the intel-gathering thief that the Headhunter had appointed his personal assistant, too.

If it hadn’t been for the purse snatcher incident the other day, I’m sure I would’ve walked away then and there. Yet that single incident had reignited my passion for adventuring, and seeing Hugel again only fanned the flames.

Sorry, Roslia...

It was no absolution, but I uttered that small apology in my heart.

“All right. I’ll come with for a little while.”

The bitter cold winter air suddenly wasn’t bothering me anymore. White flakes danced through the sky as we headed for Hugel’s house.

It’s... snowing now?

The scene I’d so longed to see was finally here, but it was overwhelmed by my desire to talk to Hugel and Eisha. The tiny ice crystals falling from the heavens were moments too late to extinguish the raging fire in my heart.

Betrayal and the End of Happiness

“Look over there, Note. That house has so many snowmen in front of it.”

“Yeah. The little and big ones together make it look like a family.”

Roslia and I were walking shoulder to shoulder through the residential district, admiring all the snowmen in front of the local houses. The snowy cityscape was a familiar sight now. It snowed nearly twice a week, and the sunlight that emerged in the clear of day wasn't nearly enough to melt it all. Ancient, dirty brown snow was piled up on the side of every road.

The stone surface of the street was icy from the melted and refrozen snow, making it slippery and hard to walk on. The alternative was walking through the dirty snow-covered sidewalks and getting your socks soaked, however. A real lose-lose. The excitement I'd first held for snow was long gone, leaving me with nothing but an exasperated desire for winter to end already. The extraordinary had become ordinary and oh-so boring.

Perhaps it was really just because I had a new fascination in my life that made the snow seem dull now.

“See you later, Roslia,” I said with a wave when we reached the usual intersection.

“Yeah...” she said, looking into my eyes. She seemed reluctant to part ways. “Note, are you really okay these days? I know how busy you are at work, so make sure you're taking care of yourself.”

“I'm fine. Things are just really busy right now.”

“As long as you're okay...”

“Sorry I haven't been able to spend much time with you lately... We didn't have long tonight either.”

It was only 8:30 PM right now. Our date night had lasted a measly two hours.

“It's fine. You have work early tomorrow too, right?”

“Yeah, lots of other guys have quit lately. I have to go in early to help with the sorting. Sorry.”

“I know, I know. You've told me plenty of times already. It's not your fault though, so don't apologize.”

“It'll be the same the day after tomorrow. Sorry I can't see you on your day off.”

“I told you to stop apologizing already. I'm just grateful you're

still making time to see me once a week even when you're so busy."

"I'm really sorry..."

"Gosh... If you're *that* sorry, then make it up to me sometime. You'll be able to take it easy once your company gets some new employees, right?"

"Yeah, probably..."

"So when that happens, take a ton of time off and go on a trip with me. I'll forgive you then."

"All right. It's a promise."

"I'll hold you to it." With that, Roslia gave me a bright smile and waved a mittened hand. "See you next week, then! Take care!"

"See you..."

I waved until Roslia was out of sight, then slowly lowered my arm.

"I made another promise I can't keep..."

Even I was disgusted with my own shameless lies. That promise and those apologies were bullshit. We weren't busy at work at all. That was just an excuse. No one had quit recently, and I wasn't going in early. It was all just a selfish pretense to make more time for myself. I was desperate for every second I could get. No way did I have time to go on a trip with Roslia...

"Standing here and kicking myself is just a waste of time too," I muttered as I turned for my destination. "Time to go to Hugel's place."

And so I headed to Hugel's for another day of training.

"Oh, Note. You're finally here."

"Hey, Hugel. Sorry for running late."

I followed Hugel into his house, taking my shoes off inside the door. We then went straight down the hallway toward the back.

"Did you eat dinner before coming?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"We can get straight to it, then."

Hugel turned and descended a staircase that led to the basement. I was right behind him. He and Eisha lived in a spacious two-story home that looked perfectly normal from the outside, but actually housed a huge training facility underground. Hugel had apparently tried to find a place to train as the Headhunter, but his solution in the end was simply to construct it beneath his own residence.

When we reached the basement, Eisha was waiting for us in her combat gear.

"Good evening, Note. We've been waiting for you," she said.

"Sorry, Eisha. I'll go get changed right now. Just give me a minute."

"Happily. I'll just be here talking to Master Hugel."

“I need to get changed too. You’ll have to wait by yourself,” Hugel countered.

“N-No...” Eisha lamented, falling to her knees.

But Hugel didn’t even spare her a second glance as he went into the changing room. This was such a familiar scene that I didn’t have the energy to comfort poor Eisha anymore.

I went into the changing room myself and retrieved some clothes that were easy to move in from my bag. I also put on some shoes and gear Hugel had lying around for me.

Once Hugel and I were ready, we met back up with Eisha in the training room.

“Shall we begin, then?” Hugel asked, the three of us facing each other.

The reason we trained together like this dated back to the first night it had snowed in the capital. After running into Hugel and Eisha on the street, I’d followed them back here. We sat in the living room and caught up with each other, talking about how our lives had been recently.

Of course, that meant me explaining what had happened with the Arrivers. How Jin had died. How Erin and Force had left on journeys of self-discovery. How I’d gone to Riece to try and get stronger myself, only to find out she was leaving too. How there had simply been no way for me or the Arrivers to continue, and how I’d ultimately ended up here.

Other than holding back the part about how Roslia had followed me, I told Hugel and Eisha everything. I didn’t want them to know I was breaking my promise to her. I already knew what I was doing was awful. I didn’t need them on my case about it too. I couldn’t tell them the truth.

But once I told them everything else, Hugel had a suggestion: *“How about we train you instead?”*

Those were the words I’d wanted to hear more than anything. I think I spilled my guts to them, in truth, because I wanted to hear that so badly.

Jin was gone. The Arrivers were through. I’d walked away from adventuring... And I hadn’t wanted any of that. I was forced to abandon my dream, fleeing to the capital with Roslia to try to forget my old life. But that wasn’t what I truly desired. All I wanted was to keep adventuring. To be an Arriver forever. To get back in the dungeon.

I loved adventuring more than I’d ever realized... and I was only able to see it now in hindsight. I lived for those days full of thrill and excitement. They were always full of new experiences, and there was

never a dull moment. After living a boring, peaceful life for half a year, I could see that... and I wanted it all back.

No surprise, then, that I'd readily agreed to Hugel's suggestion. And now here we were, training in secret like we had been since that night.

"All right," said Eisha. "Let's start with our usual warm-up match between Master Hugel and Note. You'll then both face me together."

Funnily enough, Eisha had the most practice wins out of the three of us.

Hugel fought with a handicap during training, however. The Headhunter, as he was known, was considered the strongest man in the country because of his extreme talent with Stealth. Once he activated it, no ordinary person would ever be able to detect him—even if he was standing right in front of them.

As such, he was forbidden from using it in our practice matches. It wouldn't be much of a fight if Eisha couldn't locate him, after all. That said, when it came down to earnest combat, he wasn't much of a match against her in the first place. Eisha commanded serious prowess, whereas Hugel actually had very little fighting experience.

For the record, thanks to the half-year I'd taken off, I could barely lay a finger on Hugel when we'd first started training. I was slowly getting back into the swing of things, however, and we were more evenly matched of late. I'd somehow managed to regain my form from my golden days with the Arrivers. The problem was what happened next from here. How could I continue to grow as an adventurer?

Once Hugel and I finished our warm-up match, we took a short break before teaming up against Eisha. I was using a blunted training knife, while Hugel wielded a similarly dull broadsword with a cushioned blade.

Eisha, meanwhile, squared off with us without a weapon in hand. That's right—she was unarmed. But that wasn't a handicap, mind you. It was simply her fighting style. She was blessed with martial talent, so she was actually stronger this way than she would be with a weapon in hand.

Moreover, her intelligence work often took her into enemy territory undercover. She'd learned to master fighting with her own two fists so that she could be prepared for combat under any circumstances. It was a matter of convenience.

That said... she technically wasn't *completely* barehanded right now. She was wearing a small ring on each of her middle fingers. This was one of the secrets to her strength.

"All right, Eisha. I'm ready," I said.

"Then come. You too, Master Hugel," she replied.

“You got it!” Hugel roared, taking off running.
I wasn’t far behind.

Eisha was a thief, but she didn’t strictly fight like one. She was also a spellcaster who used her equipped rings as a catalyst to activate magic in conjunction with her self-taught martial arts.

Magic was ordinarily only available to mages and other mage-based battle styles. To use it, you had to start studying it at a young age to cram all of the necessary knowledge into your head. But there was one other way to get your hands on it, a much faster way... And that was skills. If you were blessed with a magic skill, you could skip the years of hard work most mages had to put into using it.

Skills were absolute in this world, after all. Those without them could never hope to compete with those lucky enough to get them.

Granted, simply obtaining a magic-related skill wasn’t equivalent to mastering magic. In order to become a top-tier mage, you needed both intensive study *and* a skill. Those who obtained the skills without the proper training lagged behind professional mages in terms of spell repertoire, magic power, and casting time.

Hugel had now closed the distance to Eisha, and he swung his sword in a horizontal slash. This was his trademark move. It had decapitated many a criminal and earned him the Headhunter nickname.

However, just because their magic was inferior to that of professional mages didn’t mean skill-based spellcasters weren’t a force to be reckoned with. They just had to learn to fight differently than normal mages. By narrowing down their spell pool, optimizing their catalysts, and training their bodies for the activation of certain spells... they could easily outdo mages in specialized spellcasting.

“Sonic Shot!” Eisha cried.

The shockwave released from her palm repelled Hugel’s blade and sent him flying backward.

Sonic Shot was an Eisha-original technique. It was a combination of the magic spell Sonic Boom and the martial art Palm Shot. Using one of her rings as a catalyst, she unleashed the spell through her physical attack.

It was simple, but the multiplicative force was tremendous. It knocked the massive Hugel back three whole meters—and she hadn’t even hit him directly. She was suppressing her full power since this was only a training match, and she’d aimed for his weapon instead of him. Taking a blast like that dead on at full power could easily kill an unarmored man.

Fortunately, however, Eisha couldn’t use a powerful technique like that in rapid succession. That was a key weakness of spellcaster

battle styles—they weren't cut out for long-term magic battles like traditional mages.

The magical energy Eisha had stored up in her right ring was entirely spent with one Sonic Shot. It would take her time to charge it again. Long enough that it was safe to assume she wouldn't be able to use it again during this match. That meant all she had left was the spell in her left hand.

If I could get her to waste her second Sonic Shot, Hugel and I could then double-team her while she was defenseless. To that end, I purposefully moved toward Eisha's left flank to goad her into attacking.

She probably knew what I was up to, but it was in her nature to attack anyway.

"Sonic Shot!"

Pseudo Shadow Runner.

My writhing black shadow evaded the incoming blast of air. The aftershock struck me and knocked me a little off balance, but it wasn't enough to stop me. I staggered a bit, and as I did, I caught sight of Eisha's right hand moving...

Did she just drop something? It looked like a sparkling gem.

"Cover your ears, Note!" Hugel yelled suddenly.

Eisha's specialty was sonic magic. She had a natural aptitude for it thanks to her skills, Magical Energy Release and Aural Control. Magical Energy Release supplemented her ability to use magic, while Aural Control was the superior version of the Aural Boost skill, which allowed her to control her own sense of hearing.

And with that knowledge, I was able to anticipate her next move. The gem she'd tossed at the ground was a catalyst—a fully charged one.

"Sound Bomb!" she shouted.

I was struck by a head-splitting shockwave. The explosive sound slammed right into my brain via my eardrums, immediately robbing me of my sense of balance. The onslaught of sound information shut my brain down, blocking out all input from the outside world. My vision immediately went white.

After several seconds, I regained my sight, but all was quiet. I couldn't hear a thing. Not even my own breath or beating heart. Eisha's Sound Bomb had completely deafened me.

An attack like that was a perfect synthesis of her skills. With Aural Control, she could deafen us without worrying about her own hearing. Then, while her opponents were vulnerable, she could move in to finish them off with martial arts.

Sound attacks that loud couldn't be blocked just by covering your ears. And even if you did move to cover them, you were simply

leaving yourself open for a Sonic Shot. Eisha had a solid shortcut to victory with her skill set. I wouldn't be surprised if it worked every time for her.

It was so powerful, in fact... that it was specifically forbidden in our training exercises.

Eisha was moving her mouth, but I couldn't hear a word she was saying. All was yet silent. I glanced over at Hugel, who was still clutching his ears. Seemed he couldn't hear anything either.

Looks like the match is on hold until our hearing returns...

I watched Eisha bow her head over and over with her hands pressed together in an apologetic gesture.

"I'm truly so sorry!" Eisha declared loudly.

About an hour had elapsed since we'd suspended our training match. The three of us were currently sitting in Hugel's living room. There was a lingering high-pitched ringing in my ears, but my hearing had otherwise come back to me now.

"What's done is done," Hugel said, responding to Eisha's apology. "But you knew that spell was off limits, and now the neighbors are going to complain again..."

"I'm sorry..."

His exasperation was understandable. Eisha's Sound Bomb had tremendous power. It could easily knock someone unconscious with sound alone. No matter how much you braced yourself for it, there was no way of escaping it.

Its effect was so great that it had deafened us for a good while, putting our training session on hold in the meantime. Moreover, like Hugel had said, it was a neighborhood nuisance. Even though the explosion had taken place underground, it was loud enough that you could hear it clear as day from outside. Worse yet, most people were asleep at this hour. I felt bad for anyone Eisha had woken up... I wished she'd be more careful in the future, too.

"That said, why *did* you use Sound Bomb? Surely you didn't forget it was out of bounds," Hugel said, seeking clarification from Eisha.

"No, I didn't forget. Note just came at me so quickly after evading my Sonic Shot... I thought he was going to get me, so I sort of panicked and used Sound Bomb reflexively."

"He did speed up incredibly there... What exactly was that, Note?" Hugel asked, now turning to me.

When I stopped to think about it, I realized I'd never used Pseudo Shadow Runner in front of him before. I'd specifically stayed away from it in our duel over Jin for fear of its terrible recoil. It wasn't suited for long matches.

When I first started my training with Hugel and Eisha here in the

capital, my goal was to pick up the slack of the past half a year. An advanced technique like Pseudo Shadow Runner had felt out of my reach all this time, but as I slowly regained my form... Today was the first it had finally felt within my grasp, so I'd tried using it again. Never did I think it would lead to a Sonic Bomb going off.

"It's an imitation of Jin's Shadow Runner. It's an art that accelerates my movement speed to the maximum, although it's inferior in both speed and duration compared to his."

"It was amazing to see in action, Note."

"If anything, Eisha, you're the amazing one here... I never knew you had an ace like Sound Bomb up your sleeve."

"I only use it when I really feel like my life is in danger, so it's something of a last resort. The fact that I used it against you is proof of how much of a threat I considered your art to be."

"You don't need to worry. Pseudo Shadow Runner only increases my speed, so it's not like it makes me any stronger. In terms of offensive capability, I'm still the same weakling as always."

Even with day after day of training, my attack techniques hadn't improved at all. Offense had always been my weakness, even back in my Arriver days. The only combat art I could use was Critical, and even then, I wasn't very good with it. My training with Eisha and Hugel hadn't changed that.

In short, everything we'd done thus far was just to get me back to where I was half a year ago. I wasn't any stronger now than I'd been on floor 21. Nothing had changed.

"Honestly, Hugel, I have a hard time believing you and I can't even manage to win against Eisha two-on-one. Is she secretly a top-tier thief or something?"

"I believe so, yes," Hugel replied with a nod.

"I thought so. She's just way too strong. She could totally hold her own against the dungeoneers in Puriff, I bet."

I'd seen what the Arrivers could do. Riece from Valkyrie, too. And I didn't think Eisha was wanting compared to any of them. She, however, seemed to think otherwise.

"Hardly, Note. You overestimate me. The furthest I'd make it in the dungeon couldn't be more than floor 5 or so."

"You really think so? Just looking at your maximum burst damage alone, I think you're even stronger than Jin. You'd do well against dungeon monsters, given how stupid high their defenses get."

"Even if I have the attack power, I don't have the stamina required for dungeon diving," Eisha said, shaking her head. "Two Sonic Shots and one Sound Bomb are the extent of what I can use in a single fight. I don't have much magical energy, so I can only charge my rings once a day. My style just isn't cut out for dungeons, where

monsters spawn one after another.”

“Eisha mastered her fighting style as a complement to her intelligence work. One big burst of power is all she needs to escape most dangerous situations if and when she gets caught undercover.”

Hugel and Eisha both had unusual fighting styles that relied on an extreme and unbalanced use of power. They had highly specific strengths and terrible weaknesses because of it. It was a pretty uncommon style among adventurers, but I guess it paid off more for assassins and secret agents...

“Well, now that we can hear again... shall we resume our match?” Hugel asked, returning to the subject of our training.

“That sounds good, Master Hugel!”

There, Hugel and Eisha both stood up. I followed their lead.

“Thank you, both of you,” I said, rising from my chair. “For helping me train, I mean.”

“Don’t mention it,” Hugel replied, putting a hand on my shoulder. “These sparring matches are helpful for us too.”

“Really? I’m happy you set aside time for me every day, but I can’t help feeling a little guilty too.”

“We train every day anyway, so it’s no extra trouble. Right, Eisha?”

“That’s right!” Eisha readily agreed, staring at Hugel with love in her eyes.

“What?” I reflexively asked aloud. “The two of you train every day, even when you’re already this strong?”

“Of course,” Hugel said with another nod. “We’re not adventurers, so we don’t have the opportunity to fight monsters. If we don’t put in this much effort, we’ll lose our edge all too quickly.

“I also want to keep my identity as the Headhunter hidden. So even though I wish to gain combat experience, there isn’t anyone I can fight openly. That’s how Eisha and I ended up training here in the basement, but fighting the same person all the time does become repetitive and predictable.”

“That’s why it’s helpful for us for you to participate too,” Eisha chimed in.

I see... That makes a lot of sense, actually.

The Headhunter’s identity getting out would likely be a deadly affair. He’d earned the ire of too many people, and if his combat weaknesses were exposed... the assassin would quickly become the assassinated. That put me in a special position. Since I already knew Hugel’s secret, he had nothing to lose by sparring with me.

“So, Note, there’s no reason to hold back anymore, is there? Let’s get back to training.”

“Yeah.”

“Indeed. Let us go.”

And so the three of us once again descended into the basement.

*

“They say winter will be over soon, Note.”

“It’s still so cold, though. Ah, if only spring would hurry up already...”

Roslia and I were currently walking outside on a clear, cloudless morning toward the end of winter. How many weeks had it been since the last time we met up on a day off? I’d been lying about work during the week. We only had our weekend dates these days, so it felt like it had been an especially long time since I’d spent an entire day out with her.

I knew what I was doing was horrible. I had broken my promise to Roslia. Unable to abandon my dream of being an adventurer, I spent every waking moment I could spare training. I barely made any time for her. This was a complete and utter betrayal.

As such, I should have put a stop to things immediately... but I had no intention of doing so. After working a boring job as I lived out my days in tedium, training with Hugel and Eisha had become my reason for getting up in the morning. I couldn’t walk away from it for Roslia’s sake.

Fortunately, however, Hugel and Eisha had left town yesterday on business. And without my training partners, I had the entire day to spend time with Roslia. I didn’t know if it would amount to any atonement, but I wanted her to have as much fun as possible. That was my goal for our date today.

We proceeded to visit all the capital’s tourist spots that morning. I’d even stretched my wallet to spring for a fancy lunch, and we were now taking a load off at a cafe. We’d go wherever she wanted to next, and then we’d hit the high-class restaurant where I’d made a reservation for dinner. That was the plan, anyway.

“So, where would you like to go now?” I asked Roslia, who was gazing out the window with her elbows on the table.

The piles of snow on the roadside had almost all melted, leaving giant puddles of water everywhere. It just *looked* like winter was at its end now.

“You don’t have work after this, Note?” she replied.

“Nope. I’ve got the whole day off today, so I want to spend it all with you,” I answered, gazing at her.

“Two weeks ago when you canceled our date,” she said, closing her eyes, “I went to your workplace.”

“...What?” I gawked, freezing up when I heard those words.

“I had the day off myself, so I thought I’d take you lunch since

you were working so hard. I wanted to surprise you,” she continued. “But you weren’t there, Note. In fact, the whole company was closed for the day. I was stumped... You’d canceled on me because you said they were shorthanded at work, but in reality, you weren’t working at all.”

There, Roslia slowly opened her eyes.

“At first, I thought it was just some kind of mistake. But then I checked again last week... and it was the same thing. So what *were* you doing, Note? Was all that talk about being busy at work just a lie? Do you hate going on dates with me that much? Were you really going out with some girl you like better?” With teary eyes, she then asked, “Are you going to leave me again?”

I’d always known my lies would come to light someday. My dreams were an active betrayal of my promise with Roslia. But I never thought things would fall apart this way. No, not like this.

I wanted Roslia to have the best day ever today. I’d planned an entire day around her every whim... and ruined it all with my lies. I’d made her cry.

“I’m sorry...”

“Don’t apologize... That just makes it sound like you’ve done something wrong. You haven’t, have you? There must be some reason for all this, right?”

“No, I’m sorry. It’s all my fault...”

“Stop. Please don’t say that... I don’t want to hear it...” Roslia shook her head, scattering tears on the table. “It’s just because I got a little annoying, right? Seeing each other every week was too much, so you just needed some time to yourself, right? That’s all it is, right? Please say yes...”

“That’s not—”

Enough was enough. It was time to stop the lies. I’d broken my promise to her long ago. It was far too late to try to cover up what I’d done now.

There might be some lie I could spin, some deceit I could sell to ease her mind. Maybe we could put this behind us and still have a perfect day together... but that wouldn’t benefit her in the long run.

The best thing I could do for her was confess the truth. All of it. It would bring our undefined but comfortable relationship as more-than-friends-but-less-than-lovers to an end. She’d leave me out of sheer disgust.

But even so, the least she deserved was the truth. I’d bare my heart here and now, expose all the lies I’d told, and reveal to her what I had planned...

“There’s something I need to tell you, Roslia, so please listen to me. I—”

“I told you that I didn’t want to hear—”

I confessed to Roslia in the middle of her childish tantrum, “I want to become an adventurer again.”

She simply stared at me, her eyes wide.

“When Jin died, I thought I’d leave that life behind me. But it’s been half a year since then, and I’m finally thinking straight again. I’ve taken a good, long look at myself, and I’ve realized... I’ve finally realized it’s what I really want. It’s my dream.”

The emotions I’d been bottling up all this time now came bursting forth like a seal had been broken. Once I started speaking, I couldn’t stop.

“All the time we spent in the dungeon, the time I spent with the Arrivers... Those were the best days of my life. Each and every moment was precious. And now that I’ve had a taste of what that’s like, I can’t just go back to living a normal life. I don’t want this subdued happiness. I’d rather risk it all for a few brilliant moments.”

The dungeon had taken someone as strong as Jin. With my third-rate abilities, I knew I probably wouldn’t last long either. From an outsider’s perspective, I’d have to be an idiot to choose a life like adventuring. But, in truth, we don’t get to choose our dreams. We chase them because we need to, not because they’re safe.

“That’s why I lied to you, Roslia. Why I’ve been canceling our plans. I’ve been training this whole time in order to return to adventuring. I broke my promise to stay away from danger.”

“*That’s* what you’ve been hiding...?” Roslia asked slowly.

Unable to face the hurt I was causing her, I hung my head low and nodded as I replied, “I’m so, so very sorry, Roslia...”

“Jeez, Note... Is that seriously all it is? I’ve been worried sick for nothing.”

“...What?”

“I want it back. Give me back all the time and energy I wasted worrying about you. I demand a refund,” she insisted, puffing out her cheeks and turning away in a huff.

I was honestly confounded by her playful reaction.

“I’m saying I broke my promise to you, Roslia. I lied. Why aren’t you angrier?”

“Do you want me to be, Note?”

“No, that’s not what I meant... I was pretty serious about everything I said just now, though...”

I found myself scratching my head at this incomprehensible situation. Roslia jabbed her index finger at me in my befuddlement.

“I was convinced you were dating some girl from work and that you were going to leave me... but you were just standing me up to go train. I feel like I’ve been made a fool of.”

She felt like a fool? I was the one who'd braced myself for *her* to leave *me*, so if anything, I was the fool here...

"You being obsessed with training isn't news to me. You were like that even in the Arrivers, so all you've really done is go back to being your old self. No matter how dramatic you make it sound, you can't surprise me with that!"

"What about our promise, then? I told you I'd stay away from danger from now on."

"Oh, that?" Roslia briefly looked up at the ceiling as though she were recalling the moment in question. "That was originally because you said you were quitting adventuring, and if you were going to do that, I thought it would be best for you to live a peaceful life. If you want to get back in the saddle... why not go for it?"

"Huh?! You're not going to try to stop me?"

"I don't really mind. I had a ton of fun with the Arrivers too, so I totally understand why you want to get back into adventuring. Though I will be sorry to kiss the life we have as would-be lovers goodbye..." she said, shooting me an unimpressed stare.

I found myself shrinking back instinctively as I apologized, "I'm sorry about that..."

"Anyway, Note, why did it take you this long to tell me? If you wanted to be an adventurer and start training again, why didn't you come to me first?"

"Uh, that's..."

"I need to make preparations too, you know! Even if we take up adventuring again, I can't just up and quit my job out of the blue!"

"Wait, you're going to adventure again too, Roslia?"

"Do you even have to ask, Captain Obvious?" she said without hesitation.

She didn't seem overly offended, though. I was honestly grateful she was following me like it was only natural.

"What are you grinning for, Note? I'll have you know I still have a bone to pick with you!"

Oops. Looks like I was letting it show on my face. How embarrassing...

I rubbed my mouth to wipe my grin away as Roslia ranted on, oblivious to my discomposure.

"For starters, why did you have to open the conversation like that?! You made me cry a little!"

"That was a misunderstanding on your part, though..."

"I'm sorry—what was that?"

"Er, nothing."

I reflexively sat up in my chair, scared straight by the intimidating aura now coming from Roslia. I figured this was all my fault in the end anyway, so I was rightly due for an earful...

“So, what’s the next step, Note? How exactly do you plan on getting back into adventuring?”

“The next step...?” I mumbled as I organized my thoughts.

To be honest, I didn’t have any concrete plans at this point in time. Should I go dungeon diving? Or could I fight monsters as a regular adventurer on the surface? I didn’t know.

For starters, I hadn’t even decided which city to base my operation out of yet. I wanted to become an adventurer again, and that desire was driving most of my decisions. The fastest way to get back into the game would be to resume activities here in the capital.

I’d used most of the funds I’d brought with me from Puriff to start life over here. I had enough left to relocate if I really had to, but exhausting my savings was a risky maneuver. An adventurer’s income was unstable, making it hard to stash money if you weren’t on top of things.

I was lucky enough to have experience under my belt, but that was no guarantee things would go well. On top of that, dungeon diving was vastly different from adventuring on the surface. My status as a former Arriver wouldn’t really help me here.

Roslia and I had been surface adventurers before we met each other, but we were both basically just playing around back then. It hardly felt like it counted. And I would be devastated if we couldn’t put food on the table once we got back into it.

“For now, let’s test out the adventuring scene here in the capital. Once we start making some serious money, we can decide what to do from there. Maybe try another city or fortify our operation here.”

“In other words, we’re leaving the future to the future?”

“I suppose you could say that... Is that okay?”

“Why not? Adventurers are naturally dreamers after all, so I dig this kind of whimsical irresponsibility.”

“Is *that* what you think of adventurers?”

I mean, not that I could argue with her. Adventurers were inherently irresponsible and selfish. No decent human willingly chose a dangerous profession like this.

I suddenly found myself laughing out loud. Roslia went a little wide-eyed before breaking into a smile herself.

“It feels like it’s been ages since you laughed like that,” she remarked.

“Ah...” I reflexively covered my mouth with my hand, but I could feel my lips curling upward even against my palm.

It really has been a while. When was the last time I smiled without realizing it?

“You don’t have to stop. I much prefer seeing you smile, Note.”

“Wh-What are you saying...?”

I turned away out of embarrassment, but there was something comfortable about it... I didn't really hate it.

I must be having fun right now...

Jin was dead, the Arrivers were disbanded, and even Riece had quit dungeoneering. So much had ended...

And yet my life as an adventurer was really just about to begin. The mere thought filled me with enough hope to illuminate the darkness of the past.

Intersecting Fates

“So this is the adventurers guild of the capital...”

I looked up at the grand, white, three-story building. A red flag hung vertically from the roof, its design informing us that we had arrived at our destination.

This was a landmark day for us—our first day back on the job. Roslia and I were about to cross the threshold here and formally register ourselves as adventurers in the capital. Once we did that, we could happily get back to fighting monsters.

I’d put in for a leave of absence at the courier company. Once Roslia and I were managing a steady adventuring income, I would quit my day job, so to speak. I felt bad about leaving Hilton and my other colleagues, but my desire to return to adventuring far outstripped that guilt.

And my giddiness in the moment must have been showing on my face.

“You look pretty happy,” Roslia remarked in amusement.

“That’s because I *am* happy. I can’t help it.”

I really, truly couldn’t. I was positively overflowing with excitement for the future. My pessimistic outlook on life not so long ago felt like it was all just a bad dream now.

“I see. In that case, I’m glad,” Roslia replied. Her face radiated joy too, which was a bit of a relief to me.

“What kind of job request should we take?” I asked. “This’ll be our debut gig.”

“Hmm, something awesome would be nice.”

“Isn’t ‘something awesome’ a little too vague?”

“Use your imagination, Note. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah... But what kind of job *specifically* do you want to take?”

“Let me think... How about slaying a dragon?”

“Going all out from the start, huh?”

“Let’s go beat one silly in a jiffy. Nice and easy.”

There’s no “beating a dragon silly in a jiffy,” you know...

I nearly said something, but then I realized I was talking to a paladin capable of tanking a middle floor mid-boss solo. Kinda put things into perspective.

“I’d prefer a job that isn’t going to kill me. It would be kind of

embarrassing to get taken out on my first day back...”

“Don’t worry, Note! I’ll protect you!”

“That’s honestly not any less embarrassing.”

I was keenly, painfully aware of how weak I was, and the thought of Roslia carrying me only made it more humiliating.

“Aww, don’t be like that. This is our first job, so let’s kick things off with a bang by taking out a super strong monster!”

“All right, fine... I suppose that does sound more fun...”

If I thought too hard about it, I’d just wear myself out. I’d already decided to throw caution to the wind to chase my dreams. If I didn’t live free now, it’d be a waste. Besides, I had Roslia by my side and she was a hundred times stronger than me.

I’m sure we’ll be fine.

And so, overflowing with optimism for the future, we took our brave first step into the adventurers guild.

“We’ll take this one, please!” Roslia announced, slapping down one of the requests from the job board on the reception counter.

The job itself was to subjugate a blizzard wyvern, a species of dragon that nested in the mountains north of the capital. The receptionist behind the counter took one look at it...

“For the last time, no!” she pronounced, holding her arms up in the shape of a forbidding X. “Let me spell it out for you two. You just became adventurers, yes?”

This wasn’t the first time we’d been through this exchange. This was the umpteenth iteration thanks to Roslia, and every time we went through the motions, the receptionist’s brow furrowed further.

She sighed and continued, “Newly registered adventurers can only accept *green* job requests, which are designated for novices. I’ve explained this to you before, yes?”

“Yes, I’ve heard that already,” Roslia replied with a serious face.

“And so, what color is this paper? Go on. Say it out loud.”

“It’s... silver.”

“My, would you look at that?! Now tell me what part of this doesn’t make sense to you! I’ve told you a thousand times already that you can only take the jobs on green slips!” the receptionist snapped, finally losing her patience with the repetitious conversation. “Green jobs for greenhorns—it’s that simple! Once you’ve proven you can handle novice work, you can move up the ranks and take on bigger requests! Do you hear me?!”

“Loud and clear, but the green requests are all odd jobs like chores and hunting down weak mobs. Can’t we at least go after something that can fight back?”

“Then it wouldn’t be a novice job!”

Roslia didn't seem to comprehend the receptionist's explanation. She hummed in contemplation as she offered, "I *did* mention that we were adventurers in our old town, right?"

"Yes. Many times." The receptionist ruffled her own hair and sighed heavily. "I am going to say this for the last time. Please listen closely."

There, she slammed her palms against the counter.

"The adventurers guild in the capital is far stricter in its assessments than your average local guild. This is because of the highly difficult requests we receive—many jobs that cannot be completed by other guilds end up here. As such, by policy, even experienced adventurers from other guilds start anew as greenhorns here. There are special exceptions, of course, but only for those who achieved gold rank or higher at their local guild. Now, tell me... what rank were you two?"

The ranks started with green, then went to blue, purple, yellow, red, silver, gold, and so on. This wasn't particularly a question I wanted to answer, but I didn't see a way out of it at this point. I reached back into the dreary memories of my old life...

"I'm blue," I answered.

"And I'm yellow," added Roslia.

"Then no dice!" the receptionist shouted, slamming her head on the counter this time.

Why were top-tier dungeoneers ranked so low, you ask? Simply put, the dungeon guild and adventurers guild were entirely separate organizations. Their founders, their administrations... Everything about them was totally distinct.

Dungeon diving with a party required permission from the dungeon guild, bypassing the adventurers guild altogether. The opposite was also true. So no matter what you achieved in the dungeon, it wasn't reflected in your adventurers guild rank.

That's right. Everything we'd accomplished in the Arrivers meant jack here.

And so Roslia and I were treated as lowly adventurers, drawing on our ranks from our pre-Arriver days. I'd earned blue status by playing pack mule for various parties back in Broad. Roslia had made her way to yellow pretending to be a priestess in Puriff, destroying party after party along the way with sordid affairs. Those were our histories as surface adventurers.

"Just to be explicitly clear, you two, everyone ranked silver and below from other guilds must start over here again as a greenhorn! Even if we transferred your blue and yellow ranks, that still wouldn't be enough for you to take on this silver request!" the receptionist shouted loudly, her forehead still red from where it had hit the

counter.

Roslia, meanwhile, still seemed displeased with this explanation. She pursed her lips and objected, "But we used to go dungeon diving in Puriff!"

"Is that so?" the receptionist asked with a dubious look. "We get that a lot, you know. Adventurers who lie about their pasts in order to take on higher-ranked jobs."

"I'm not lying!" Roslia snapped back.

"Then, if I may ask, what is the furthest floor you managed to reach?"

"Floor 21," Roslia answered proudly.

"Ha!" the receptionist snorted. "You've exposed yourself. The furthest anyone has cleared in the Dungeon of Puriff is currently floor 20, and you're saying *you* have been to floor 21? Really, you should do a little research before telling a tall tale like that. It's so obviously a lie."

"I told you that I'm not lying!" Roslia declared, stamping her foot in frustration.

The receptionist's information was good... and yet, indeed, Roslia wasn't lying. The Arrivers had cleared floor 20 and reached floor 21. Both facts were simultaneously true. The problem was that the receptionist would never believe that we were former Arrivers. Even if we tried to tell her, she'd just think we were lying again.

"Let's give it up, Roslia, and work our way through the green jobs," I said with an air of resignation.

"Are you really okay with that, Note? Can you really accept finding someone's lost pet as our grand debut gig?! We agreed we'd fight a strong monster! Let's defeat that blizzard wyvern!" she argued.

I was honestly grateful for Roslia's consideration. I wanted to take on a difficult job myself, but it was clear we weren't going to get anywhere by arguing here. Roslia's back and forth with the receptionist was already getting heated enough to attract attention from the people around us.

Yup. The other adventurers at the guild were all staring at us like we were troublesome customers raising a fuss. I mean, we *were* troublesome customers raising a fuss. No two ways about it. I wasn't sure I could take much more... I just wanted to quietly go find that lost puppy at this point. That's how exhausted I was.

"Smart boy," the receptionist threw in. "You should follow his example, miss. If you cause any more trouble here, I'll have your qualifications as adventurers revoked."

"Ugh..."

Even Roslia faltered in the face of a threat like that. It similarly stirred a buzz in the crowd of onlookers we'd gathered.

“Did you hear that? They’re gonna get their quals revoked!”

“Didn’t they only get them just now?”

“Down and out in thirty minutes, huh? Isn’t that a new record here?”

“The previous record holder was that guy who quit after three days about five years ago. These two beat him by two days and 23.5 hours! That could be a world record!”

“A new legend is born in the capital!”

They sure were getting themselves fired up... Damn rubberneckers. This was definitely *not* the kind of legend I wanted to leave behind. Thanks.

“This sucks, but I guess we have to back down for now... You sure use some dirty, underhanded tricks, lady,” Roslia said with a glare.

“Wow. I was kind of kidding before, but now I’m seriously considering revoking your qualifications,” the receptionist replied, scratching her cheek in an exasperated fashion.

I stood silently beside Roslia as the gaggle of onlookers continued to enjoy the chaos. The guild was abuzz with all sorts of chatter, when out of the blue...

“What’s going on here? Why’s everyone gathered at the reception counter? Is something wrong?” a bright voice called from the entrance of the guild.

I looked that way, and the group of onlookers parted to reveal a handsome young man at the door. He wore a set of golden armor and four differently colored swords at his waist. I didn’t know the guy, but the receptionist leaned forward in excitement upon seeing him.

“Why, if it isn’t Eldrich of the Raiders!” she cried in a high-pitched voice.

The crowd burst into a second round of commotion when they heard this.

“The leader of the Raiders is here! They’re, like, the most influential party in town!”

“They say Eldrich’s a gold-rank adventurer who can defeat a dragon solo!”

“He’s a hero who always arrives fashionably late to save the day—and the ladies!”

“Voted the hottest adventurer in the capital four years in a row now!”

I wasn’t really familiar with the adventurer scene in the capital, but the gabbing going on around the room now gave me a pretty good idea. This Eldrich guy was apparently tremendously popular. And if all the talk was true, he was also quite talented.

“What seems to be the matter?” he asked, smiling sweetly as he approached the receptionist.

She blushed and replied, "These two new adventurers keep trying to take job requests well past their rank. I've explained things to them over and over, so I'm a little at a loss here. Would you mind talking to them, Eldrich?"

"That does sound like a problem..."

Eldrich pensively placed a hand against his chin and closed his eyes. Even his thinking pose was practically blinding thanks to his attractive face.

"Get a load of this, Note!" Roslia whispered loudly. "The moment this Eldrich guy walked in, the receptionist's voice rose by an octave. Heh, talk about obvious."

"H-Hey!" the receptionist barked in a panic.

"Oho! Flustered, are we? Bullseye!"

"I-I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Goodness. I wonder if it's considered acceptable for a humble guild employee to bat her eyelashes at an adventurer like that..."

"That's enough, you! Hush up already!"

"If you want me to hush, it'll take acceptable compensation. Like, for example..."

There, Roslia slid the blizzard wyvern job request back across the counter.

Hey, when did this turn into some shady deal? I'm embarrassed to be a part of this! As for you, Miss Receptionist, stop looking so tempted! Don't give in to bribery!

I was about to crack under the pressure of all the stares we were getting. I was quickly reaching my wits' end... But just as I was about to suggest we retreat for the day, the rest of Eldrich's party appeared behind him.

"Something the matter, Eldrich?" the man leading the pack asked.

In response to the worsening situation, my eyes darted around the room in a panic... only to fall on the girl standing to the far right of the group. Our gazes met, and her emerald eyes went wide.



“What...?”

My body froze in shock. I couldn't seem to focus on anything. All the confidence I'd entered the guild building with was now gone.

Why...? Why are you here? How can this be?

But before I could squeeze out so much as a word, the girl opened her lovely mouth and said...

“Don't tell me... Is that you, Note?”

Her voice brought back so many memories that I wanted to cry.

No way...

I'd thought I'd never see her again, but there was no mistaking it. I would know this girl anywhere. I called out to her in my heart.

Miya, what are you doing here?

Miya Line was my one and only childhood friend. We were born and raised in the same village, and I'd spent fifteen years in love with her. We swore to become top-tier adventurers together. She was the one who'd gotten me into adventuring in the first place.

We'd left Changs together for our presentation ceremonies. That was when I got my trash skill, while Miya was blessed with an extraordinary skill set. Yet in spite of the disparity between us, she continued to work hard toward our dream for the both of us.

But I betrayed her. Hurt her. And she left me for it. That was all there was to our relationship. That was the end of our story.

I thought I'd never see her face again. That I'd never have to. But coincidence is a cruel thing. It sometimes brings together people who should never meet more.

I have to get out of here.

That's what I decided then and there. I grabbed Roslia's hand and pulled hard.

“What are you doing, Note? That girl is talking to you.”

I came to a screeching halt when I heard her say that... There was no way I could run. Not now that Roslia had said my name. If only she'd just stayed silent, we could have escaped without Miya being any the wiser. She'd just have thought it was a case of mistaken identity.

When I stopped in my tracks, that gave Miya all the opportunity she needed.

“So it really is you! It's me, Miya! Don't tell me you've forgotten me!” her clear voice rang out.

Like I could ever forget you...

I choked back those words on the tip of my tongue.

At this point, it was pointless to try to play dumb. I had no choice but to face her. For better or worse, it seemed Miya was at least willing to talk to me.

Given how we'd parted ways, she had every reason to hate me. I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd simply pretended not to know me... but here she was, talking to me like everything was normal.

What I'd done to Miya was unforgivable. I was so jealous of her skills that I let self-pity get the better of me. I gave up on our dream of becoming top adventurers together... all while taking advantage of her kindness. I accepted credit for her achievements, riding the coattails of her power.

And when she finally called me on it, I lashed out at her. I said all sorts of hurtful things even though I was the one at fault. Looking back on it now, it really made me hate myself. I was the worst.

Miya must hate me too... I bet she's regretting saying anything to me right now. It's too late for me to even apologize. She'll never forgive me...

I knew I shouldn't get too deeply involved with her, so I chose the plainest response I could think of.

"Long time no see. Is that really you, Miya?" I asked casually.

"Of course it is! Answer me the next time I call out to you."

"My bad."

"I almost thought you'd forgotten about me for a moment there."

"I haven't forgotten you, I promise. Your hair is different, so it just took me a second to recognize you."

I gestured at her silky blonde hair, now cropped short at her shoulders. It gave a fairly different impression than the braid she always used to keep it in.

Of course, what I'd said was just an excuse. I'd been dead set on ignoring her and leaving. Her hair had nothing to do with it. I'd recognize her no matter how she styled it.

"Oh, yeah. I guess this is the first time you've seen me with short hair. Well? What do you think?" Miya asked, drawing closer and gazing up into my eyes.

She'd always done that when we were younger. It seemed that, haircut or not, she was still the same person on the inside.

I stared at my reflection in her pupils and answered, "I think it suits you."

"Really? I actually don't care for it very much..."

"How come? It's cute."

"Cuter than before? I guess it's fine, then," she replied, twirling the ends of her hair around her finger with a stiff smile.

Crap. I missed my chance to bring the small talk to an end... I bet she's thinking the same thing. For her sake, the best thing I can do is just cut things off—

But no sooner had I decided that than a carefree, cavalier voice interjected...

"Excuse me, Note. Could you *not* flirt with other girls when you

already have a woman like me by your side?"

Please get a clue, Roslia...

I'd once told her the story of what happened with me and my childhood friend, but that was while we were trying to save Force from her before she joined the Arrivers. She might still recall the story, but there was no way of telling if she remembered Miya's name or not.

I guess it's too much to expect her to know what's going on here... Even so, did she have to say that? What if Miya really thinks I'm trying to flirt with her?

"Hey, would you lay off?" I asked, nudging Roslia.

"Wait, what? Were you seriously trying to flirt?! Why else would you want me to lay off—"

"No! Don't just go assuming things, because you have the absolute wrong idea here!"

"Uh-huh, how fishy... You look pretty flustered right now, Note."

"That's probably because I *am*!"

"Oh? And just who is this girl, exactly? It seems you know each other..."

"Er..."

As I found myself hesitating, Miya stepped forward to answer.

"Um, I'm Note's childhood friend, Miya Line. And who might you be?"

"You're Miya, his childhood friend?" Roslia placed her hand against her chin and closed her eyes. After a moment, she opened them again and turned to me, pale in the face. "Did I just make things extremely awkward, then?"

"Super."

"I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to."

It seemed she recalled my sad tale after all. And once the severity of it all set in, she felt bad about it... but there was no taking back what she'd just done.

"We'll talk about this later..." I said in a low voice.

"I'm so sorry! Please forgive me!" she shouted, shaking me by the shoulders.

"I'm glad you two are having so much fun, but don't leave me hanging here..." Miya cut in with an exasperated look.

"Of course. I'd like to apologize to you as well, Miya. Now, what was it that you needed?" Roslia inquired.

"I was just asking for your name..."

"Ah, that's right," Roslia said with a nod. "I'm Roslia Minkgott. Note and I used to be in the same party, which is why we're adventuring together now."

I was worried she was going to say something weird again, but it

seemed she'd gone with a safe answer out of deference. I let out a little sigh of relief.

"Lucky you, Note, getting to be in a party with such a cute girl..."

"There were other members, so it wasn't like it was just the two of us."

What would Miya think if I told her that I'd joined the Arrivers and started taking adventuring seriously? If I told her that I'd changed my lazy ways and started putting in the effort to change myself? Would she take another look at me? Would she see me in a better light?

No, surely not. She'd just wonder why I couldn't do that when we were together. So rather than upset her, I figured it would be best not to mention the Arrivers at all. It wasn't like we were going to talk again beyond this anyway.

"Are you in a party with that Eldrich fellow over there, Miya?" I asked, steering the conversation away from myself.

"That's right. We're the Raiders," she replied, looking toward the rest of her group.

Eldrich, who was standing at the lead, then stepped forward.

"You're acquainted with this boy, Miya?" he asked.

"That's right. We used to adventure together."

"You mean before you joined our party? He must have been your companion before you came to the capital, then."

"Yup. We adventured in a town called Broad."

"Broad is a fair distance from the capital, no? How fateful to run into each other here."

"You think?" Miya asked, cocking her head quizzically.

Personally, I didn't consider it fate. It was just the result of coincidental carelessness on my part. I knew Miya had continued to pursue adventuring after we parted ways. It was really no surprise that an adventurer of her caliber had ended up here where all the bigtime jobs were.

Moreover, we were both from a small village in the middle of nowhere. She probably had the same fascination with big cities that I did. Of course she'd naturally gravitated toward the capital.

"You should treasure such encounters," Eldrich continued.

"Especially reunions. The world is a big place, after all. To lose touch often means to lose one another, you know."

"Is that some kind of saying? It's a good one," Miya laughed at the young man before her.

Were these two really just fellow party members? It seemed like Miya might have some undefined relationship with him, just like I did with Roslia.

"Now," Eldrich said, clapping his hands together, "let's get down

to business.”

“What business?” Miya asked intently.

“Word is that these two are causing trouble for the guild,” Eldrich explained, looking our way.

“Is that true?” Miya asked, following suit.

“Well, yeah...” I admitted.

As pathetic as it was, I couldn’t deny it. We’d given the poor receptionist hell. Or rather, Roslia had.

“Since you know this boy, Miya, why don’t you sort things out here?” Eldrich suggested.

“What exactly happened, Note?” Miya asked.

There was no point in lying, so I broke down and gave her a succinct account of what had happened. I told her that we were new to adventuring in the capital and that we’d tried to take a job beyond our ranks, but were promptly shot down.

“Yeah, not even I can back you up on this one...” Miya sighed after hearing me out.

“It was totally our mistake. We’re sorry,” I apologized, lowering my head in shame. I could hear the sound of my rock-bottom reputation falling even lower. “I’ve kinda had enough of being gawked at, so I’m not really in the mood to take a job anymore anyway. We’ll be calling it a day here. Sorry for the trouble.”

I figured it was high time we wrapped things up. Miya was probably sick and tired of talking to me. The situation had artificially extended our conversation—she was just being polite.

I bowed casually to her, Eldrich, and the receptionist. I then looked at Roslia and nodded toward the door. We turned to go, but a clear voice called out once more...

“Are you two leaving already? Even though you haven’t done anything yet?”

“Er, well, yeah...”

“Why don’t you at least accept a job request? You’ve decided to start adventuring in the capital, haven’t you?”

I looked over my shoulder at the job board one last time.

“Nah, that’s all right. There aren’t any good jobs anyway. I’ll come back later when I feel like it,” I said, attempting to take my leave.

Nothing could have prepared me for the shocking words that left Miya’s mouth next: “In that case, do you want to do a job together?”

“...Huh?”

What had she just said? I doubted my own ears.

“I’m a gold-rank adventurer, so if I accompany you, we’ll be able to take up to yellow jobs. The silver-ranked wyvern extermination is still out of the question... But it’ll open up your options, no?”

“That’s not really the problem—”

Miya ignored my protest and turned to the receptionist to ask, "That's how it works, right?"

"If a gold-rank adventurer teams up with two greenhorns, yes. You would indeed be permitted to take jobs up to the yellow rank."

With that confirmation, Miya turned to Eldrich next and asked, "We're done for the day once you hand in our report, right?"

"That's the plan. But are you really going to help these folks, Miya?"

"Yeah. I can't just leave an old friend out in the cold."

"How you spend your free time is up to you. Do as you please."

"Thanks, everyone," Miya said to her party before turning back to us. "So I'll be teaming up with you for your job today."

"No, wait..."

I couldn't hide my obvious confusion at how things were proceeding. Miya was supposed to hate me. I was the worthless childhood friend who'd taken advantage of her goodwill and blamed her for it. I had to be the last person in the world she wanted to adventure with.

"I can't ask you to do that, Miya... We'll just come back and try again some other day."

"The jobs won't be any different."

"Then we'll just pick from what's available..."

"This isn't good, you know? You've made the decision to start adventuring anew in this city, right? You can't lose your motivation on your first day."

"Even so..."

Ah, I see what's happening here... Miya's just kindhearted.

She was so kind, in fact, that she was willing to lend a hand even to the childhood friend she detested. That was a big mistake, though. There's no reason to help out the people who hurt you.

"I really would feel bad for roping you into helping us, so we'll pass. If you have the day off, you're better off resting up anyway."

"Am I just being a hassle, then? Do you not want me to come?"

"That's not it..." I stumbled over my words, unsure of how to respond.

If I were being completely honest, this was kind of a hassle. I still felt guilty about what I'd done to her, and I knew she wasn't really interested in doing any of this. I personally wanted nothing more than to run away without ever looking back.

I tossed a desperate glance Roslia's way. It would've been best for her to step in and refuse here, which was what I was trying to signal.

"I don't really mind either way. It's up to you, Note."

It seemed she'd misunderstood, however—she thought I *wanted* Miya to come along. Now I was stuck. I couldn't refuse Miya under the

circumstances. That would be like exposing all my inner turmoil.

I just didn't have the heart to be rude to her again.

"I guess we'll take you up on your offer..."

Thus I begrudgingly picked the option that would probably make us all miserable.

"Sense any foxwolves?" Roslia asked from the head of the group.

The three of us—me, Roslia, and Miya—were currently in a forest northwest of the capital on a job. Our objective was to take out a pack of foxwolves. It was a yellow request—one meant for mid-rank adventurers.

Foxwolves were lupine monsters that had the unique ability to transform into other mobs. Their bodies were notably smaller than that of other wolves, and they were considerably less of a threat in combat because of it. To make up for that, they were extremely intelligent. They'd often employ tactics like turning into smaller creatures to surprise unsuspecting adventurers, or turning into something completely different to flee if they were cornered. They were crafty little suckers.

"I can't tell where they are at all..." I replied to Roslia with a shake of my head.

On our way out here, Roslia had told Miya about my aptitude for Enemy Search. That immediately landed me the role of scout. It would be my responsibility to find our target monsters. I'd accepted the task, but had yet to produce any results.

Enemy Search was an art that revealed monsters' locations and relative threat levels. I'd made a point to familiarize myself with all the mobs in the dungeon so I would recognize them when I encountered them...

But I'd never seen a foxwolf before. I wouldn't know the presence of one even if I managed to detect it. Things would be different once I actually found and saw one, but that was apparently a tall order.

"Can you really use Enemy Search, Note?" Miya asked dubiously.

The Note she knew from back in the day didn't know a single art. I still hadn't told her anything about my time with the Arrivers or the training I'd done for dungeon diving.

"I can, but it doesn't seem to be working so hot..." It was pathetic, but there was no point in being stubborn here, so I gave up. "You've got detection arts too, right, Miya? Want to give it a go?"

"Are you sure? If you want to find the pack on your own, I don't mind waiting..."

"No, that's all right. I'd rather get this job over with."

"In that case... Okay." Miya closed her eyes and pressed her index finger to her forehead. "Here goes."

Her battle style was a role called hunter. As the name implied, it specialized in tracking down quarry. Detection arts would be one of her strong suits.

“There’s something that might be them over in that direction,” she reported, opening her eyes and pointing between the trees. “Let’s hurry before they run away.”

“Is the pack moving or something?”

“No. I mean just in case.”

Miya left me in the dust as she briskly picked up her pace. As I watched her go, Roslia—who’d been oddly quiet while Miya and I were talking—sidled up to me.

“You two sure seem close,” she whispered so that Miya wouldn’t hear.

“I’m glad it looks that way. I’m pretty mentally exhausted right now...” I whispered back.

“I’m surprised. I thought you were enjoying yourself.”

“What makes you say that? You’re familiar with our history, Roslia, so I don’t know how in the world you reached *that* conclusion...”

“Well, Miya sure doesn’t seem all that bothered by it. If she really hated you, she wouldn’t have offered to help with our job request like this, now would she?”

“You’re wrong. Miya’s just too nice. She’d help out anyone—even the childhood friend she hates.”

“I wonder if anyone in the world is really that kind at heart...” Roslia muttered skeptically. She then, however, quickly put the matter behind her and clapped her hands together. “But if you weren’t actually enjoying talking to her, all my thoughtful consideration was for nothing...”

“I thought you were being awfully quiet.”

Roslia could be quite charitable—she just ordinarily chose not to be. I’d noticed that she was holding back so as not to interrupt my conversations with Miya, apparently under the mistaken belief that I wanted to reconcile with her.

“It’s fine, Roslia. You don’t have to act any different from normal. Just be your usual self.”

“Are you sure? I might grab your hand like this all of a sudden,” she teased, holding my right hand with both of hers.

“Okay, I take that back. Restrain yourself a *little*.”

Roslia and I were getting our hands held on this job, so it felt too awkward to be holding hands literally...

Roslia closed in on a gray, wolflike creature. She held a dazzling sword in hand—this was Fractus, the blade she could summon with

her Guide of the Holy Sword skill. She quickly pivoted on her left leg, slicing horizontally through the beast.

In that same instant, I heard the whooshing sound of something shooting through the air beside me. Miya was firing a continuous stream of arrows, nocking one immediately after another. They sailed between the densely packed trees, each piercing a wolf. In the time it took Roslia to defeat one, Miya had finished off three. Her rapid fire continued without end, turning wolf after wolf into a pincushion.

The foxwolves now knew they were being hunted. One of them let out a howl, and the pack swiftly transformed into birds. They flapped their wings and scattered into the air, but Miya's arrows found their targets even mid-flight. The only difference now was that she was piercing feathered hide instead of fur.

And just like that, birds were dropping left and right. A few moments more, and the entire pack would be exterminated. Seeming to sense this, half of the remaining foxwolves all swooped at Miya. It was a distraction to allow the other half to escape.

Miya threw her bow high into the air, resorting to her fists and feet as she knocked down each and every avian-transformed foxwolf that approached. See, in addition to Bow Mastery, Miya also had a high-level Physical Boost skill. Each direct hit came with the sound of breaking bones. One blow from her was enough to kill.

After striking down the group of foxwolves that had charged at her, Miya caught her bow and started shooting again without missing a beat. As she did, the beginning of an incantation drifted from her lips...

"Esmeralda!" The air around her visibly turned green—a sign of spirit magic. "I'm going to clean the rest of them up in one go, so you should fall back, Roslia!"

"Huh? Why?"

"Just get behind me!"

Apparently she intended on wiping out the entire area to keep the foxwolves from getting away. Roslia looked like she hadn't yet had enough fun swinging her sword, but she readily backed off when she sensed something strange brewing in the air.

"What's about to happen?" she asked.

"You'll see," I replied.

We then watched as Miya continued her rapid fire. Eventually, she resumed her incantation.

"Viento! Huracán!"



Magical energy swirled around her to create a whirlwind. It rapidly increased with violent intensity, growing into a sweeping hurricane that tore through the forest.

Spirit magic was typically incanted by three keywords. The first hailed a particular spirit—the very foundation of spirit magic. The second word designated an element, which casters had to choose from their repertoire. Finally, the last word specified the phenomenon of the spell, or the form it took.

In Miya's case just now, she'd summoned Esmeralda the Verdant Spirit and channeled her magical energy into a devastating whirlwind.

All it left in its wake was a swath of broken trees. It had utterly overwhelming destructive power. There was nothing left alive within a dozen meters or so. If we hadn't stuck close to Miya, in the eye of the storm, we would have been blown away by it too.

"I heard she was strong, but to see what she can really do..." Roslia muttered once the one-sided thrashing was over.

Her surprise was understandable. I'd felt the same way when I first saw it. It was so powerful that I'd despaired with hopelessness.

"She might even be stronger than me..." Roslia continued to mutter in awe.

"Who knows? You have completely different fighting styles, so it's not that easy to judge."

I tried to imagine the two girls fighting, and I didn't think it would be an easy win for either of them. If it were a fight against monsters, however, Miya probably had the advantage with three advanced combat skills—Superior Bow Mastery, Major Physical Boost, and Protection of the Forest Spirit King. She had top-class power in close, mid, and long range combat. Being an adaptable all-rounder was Miya's claim to fame. She was like an entire party in one. It was hardly an exaggeration to say she was the ideal adventurer.

"Anyway, Roslia," I said. "You certainly haven't lost your touch. You really haven't been fighting at all over the past half a year?"

"Well, it's not like I was doing secret training like a *certain* someone!"

"I am truly, very, deeply sorry," I apologized, bowing my head.

"What are you two all fired up about?" Miya asked, walking back to the two of us.

"We were talking about how strong you are," Roslia offered.

"Ahaha, thank you. But you're amazing yourself, Roslia. Are you really only a yellow-rank adventurer?"

Miya's suspicion was more than justified—Roslia was the paladin of a top-tier dungeon party, after all. The average surface adventurer couldn't hold a candle to her. But here where we were lowly surface

adventurers ourselves, she was merely a priestess who was more concerned about men than healing. That was why her rank had stagnated at yellow.

“Heehee, yup! That’s me!” Roslia giggled, playing along.

“Really?” Miya gasped. “I bet you could reach gold if you seriously went for it.”

“You think so? In that case, let’s become gold-rank adventurers already, Note!”

“You make it sound like it’s easy...”

Gold rank naturally wasn’t something that could be achieved overnight, and my personal prospects were looking grim. I hadn’t defeated a single foxwolf on this job. All I’d really done was watch.

“Yeah, I think it might be a little hard for Note right now...”

See? Even Miya knew it. Her troubled face said it all. How awkward...

“Well, our work here is done,” I volunteered to change the subject. “Let’s head back for now.”

“Yeah, let’s,” Miya cheerfully agreed. (Thank god.)

“I know you could do it, Note...” Roslia mumbled in a pout, but relented soon enough.

“All right, let’s get a move on. We need to report the job is finished.”

As proof the request was completed, we scavenged the foxwolf corpses for appropriate trophies. Evidence, if you will. Once we’d gathered enough, we set off on our way back to the city.

“Man, our first job was sure over quick,” remarked Roslia. “We spent longer collecting trophies than we actually did fighting the wolves.”

“Yeah. It was all thanks to Miya,” I replied.

“Heehee...” Miya giggled bashfully.

“Miya’s spell was so over the top that it made gathering the wolf corpses a real pain.”

“Er... heehee,” she laughed awkwardly this time. “I’m sorry. I got a little excited.”

“You call that ‘excited’?! You unleashed the wrath of nature!”

“C’mon, Roslia, it’s fine. Thanks to that spell, none of the monsters got away.”

“That’s true. We’re done before noon and everything.” The sun was just short of high overhead now. “Did you have plans for the rest of the day?”

“I was thinking we could turn in our report and discuss our options over lunch.”

“Sounds good! We could even do another job this afternoon at this rate.”

I nodded at Roslia's suggestion, and like a bolt out of the blue, someone else exclaimed their agreement too...

"Yeah, that sounds good!" Miya said cheerfully, sounding astoundingly on board with the idea.

"Huh?" I couldn't help gasping. "You're coming with us...?"

"What? Are you going to kick me to the curb now?"

"I'm not kicking you anywhere—"

You're not even in our party to begin with...

What on earth was going through her head? Didn't she hate my guts? Hadn't she gotten sick of me years ago? Even in this situation, I had to wonder...

No, it had nothing to do with the situation. Even when we were close, I'd never been able to tell what Miya was thinking. Still, she was even more of a mystery to me now than ever before.

"You sure? Isn't today your day off?" I asked.

"I've come too far to turn back now. I'll help you until the end," she declared, pumping both fists enthusiastically.

Was she offering to help us out of kindness? I couldn't imagine why she'd go so far for me, who'd only ever returned her kindness with spite. It was all I could do to mumble...

"...You don't have to do this..."

A Warped Relationship

Two weeks had passed since my reunion with Miya.

“Here’s your pay for today’s job,” the receptionist said, slapping a wad of notes and gold coins on the counter.

This was the same woman we’d encountered on our first day at the guild. She didn’t think much of us because of said encounter, so she always treated us a little more curtly than the other adventurers. That was totally our fault, mind you, so we couldn’t really complain.

“Thank you very much,” Roslia replied, politely accepting the money. She immediately began counting it up, but stopped short. “Huh? This isn’t enough... Did you swipe some, lady?”

“Don’t go picking fights for fun,” I scolded, landing a karate chop on Roslia’s head.

“Hey, that hurt!”

“Then stop provoking people on purpose.” I bowed to the receptionist, then dragged Roslia away. “It’d be no laughing matter if we really got banned, so please behave yourself.”

“Since you *insist*, I guess I’ll cool it for today...”

“That ‘for today’ part is what bothers me.”

Once we were away from the reception counter, I took a deep breath. Roslia finished counting up the money and divvied it up into thirds.

“Here’s your share,” she said.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“Thank you!” Miya echoed.

Miya and I both accepted the cash Roslia handed us, stowing it away in our wallets. Now, why was Miya still with us, you ask? I’d been wondering that myself.

The day we’d first run into each other here at the guild, she’d helped us out with the foxwolf job. She’d offered to keep working with us after that, and I’d honestly thought she meant for the day... but she’d showed up again the next day, and the day after that, and so on. She’d come nearly every day, and I politely tried to decline her help each time, but Miya always managed to insert herself one way or another.

Was everything okay with the Raiders, though? Miya said it wasn’t a problem, but surely the Raiders had their own work to take care of. I tried asking about it casually, but she dodged the question

every time. Other than my suspicions on that front, it was almost like we were back to adventuring the way we used to.

If you asked me whether or not we'd made up, however, I couldn't exactly say yes. We hadn't yet talked about what happened the day we broke up. Partly because I was a coward. I knew if I crossed that line, someone was going to get hurt—be it me, Miya, or even someone else.

I didn't really care about me getting hurt, but I didn't want to upset Miya ever again. And since she hadn't brought it up herself, I assumed she didn't want to talk about it. That being the case, there was no reason for me to go dredging up the past, right?

At least, that was the convenient excuse I was running with. In truth, I had no idea what Miya was thinking, and I had no idea what I should do about it.

"You sure were funny today, Note," she said with a smile.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, feigning ignorance.

"You forgot to bring your dagger!"

"Oh, that..." I replied vaguely.

Yup, I'd forgotten my dagger today just like she said. I'd accidentally left it at Hugel's the night before. Was an adventurer who forgot their own weapon really an adventurer at all? I didn't think so myself.

"Well, even if I'd brought it, it wouldn't have made much of a difference..." I sighed.

"Don't say things like that," Miya scolded.

Whether or not I was armed, Miya and Roslia could easily exterminate whatever monsters we faced. The highest ranking jobs we could take right now were yellow requests, which were geared toward mid-level adventurers. They didn't stand a chance against the gold-ranked Miya and the dungeon vet Roslia. The two of them could clean house on their own.

In my last days with the Arrivers, I would sometimes go toe to toe with a monster to distract it while the rest of the party managed business. There was no need for that against weaker monsters, however, so I was essentially just following Miya and Roslia around. I'd never seen most of the monsters we were tackling for these job requests either, so my Enemy Search was practically useless too. I had to leave all the scouting and detection to Miya. I wasn't lifting a finger.

"Well, whatever... As long as Miya's having fun..." I mumbled to myself.

For the time being, she didn't seem to be offended by our arrangement and my lack of contribution. In fact, Miya was all too happy to wipe out monsters single-handedly. But if that changed, I'd have to jump in...

And in order to do that, I was keeping up my training with Hugel and Eisha. I couldn't defeat a single monster as things stood, so I was trying to pick up some attack arts. Without them, I'd just get in the way in combat—especially with a badass like Miya.

“What was that?” Roslia asked in response to my muttering.

“Nothing,” I replied, quickly shaking my head. “Just thinking out loud.”

“If you say so. Wanna take a lunch break for the afternoon?” she replied.

“Shouldn't Note go get his dagger first? We've got enough time for him to make a stop at home, right?” Miya interjected.

“That's true...” Roslia hummed.

Presently, I believed my dagger to be at Hugel's place. I doubted he'd be home in the middle of the day, but more pressingly, I couldn't tell the girls that was where I'd left it. I hadn't told a soul I was seeing Hugel on the regular. Even though I trusted Roslia, I couldn't expose his identity as the Headhunter. There was no telling how that information might get out if I opened my mouth, so I'd simply decided to keep it shut.

“I don't think it's at home,” I explained.

“Does that mean you lost it?! We gotta go look for it!” Miya exclaimed.

“It's fine. I'm pretty sure I just left it at a friend's house, so it's not like it's going anywhere.”

“Oho, a *friend's house*, huh?” Roslia murmured with a glint in her eye. “Tell me, Note, does a woman happen to live there?”

“Technically, I guess?”

Eisha lived there too, after all.

“I swear, Note. I can't take my eyes off you for a second.”

“What makes you say that...?”

“Y-You have a mistress, Note?!”

“Don't sink to Roslia's level, Miya. Besides, how did you get 'mistress' out of that?”

“Well, you're dating Roslia, aren't you?”

“Wuh?”

For a moment, I thought she was just teasing me like my old coworkers used to. The look on Miya's face, however, said she was dead serious. Moreover, she wasn't the type to joke around about that kind of stuff in the first place.

“Wait a second... Did you take Roslia's joking around when you two first met seriously?”

I believe she'd said something to the effect of, “You already have a woman like me.” Don't tell me Miya had believed it all this time... I'd thought she knew better.

"That was just a joke? So... you and Roslia aren't actually dating?"

"I mean, who really knows?"

"Stop trying to sound deep, Roslia. No, Miya, we're not dating."

"Don't just come out and say it like that. Booooring," Roslia complained with a wave of her hand.

"Here we go again," I sighed. "The Crusher comes out to play..."

"I thought I asked you not to bring that up every chance you got!"

"You walked right into it this time!"

If Miya mistakenly thought Roslia and I were dating, she might feel like the third wheel and quit helping us out. It would be the end of our temporary party.

Wait... that might not be so bad.

Miya was better off not associating with us. Splitting up would be mutually beneficial. We'd stop causing her trouble, and she could go back to focusing on the Raiders.

"Actually, yeah, who knows?" I hemmed. "Roslia and I might be dating after all."

"Y-You mean it?!" Roslia exclaimed, leaping into the air in surprise.

Talk about overreacting...

"Oh, now you're just joking around."

Wow, seen through in an instant... I should've known it was pointless to lie to Miya.

"What?! Why would you tell such a nasty joke, Note?!"

Listen, it's complicated. It was a pained decision, really, and now you've gone and ruined the entire plan.

"Just having some fun... or something..."

"That's awful! How could you play with a maiden's heart like that?" Roslia demanded through her crocodile tears.

"I'm sorry," I apologized for now.

Roslia normally picked up what I was putting down, so I'd thought she'd catch my drift here too. No dice. I should've known I was asking for too much.

"Speaking of, are you dating that Eldrich guy, Miya?" Roslia asked the second she was done crying.

That was a subject I hadn't dared to broach... The significant other of my first love, huh? It was strange to think about. I sort of wanted to know, yet sort of didn't. The idea bothered me, but Miya's life was hers to live. Her relationships were none of my business. However...

"We're not dating. He's just our party leader," she replied in brief.

"So that's all it is? What a shame..."

"Why is it a shame that I'm not dating Eldrich?"

"I thought I had one less rival to deal with."

"Huh?"

“Oh, nothing! Don’t worry about it.” Roslia shook her head. “Are you seeing anyone else, then? Do you have a lover at the moment?”

“I don’t. Never have.”

“You’re kidding, right? I never would’ve guessed...” I blurted out in honest surprise.

“Are you making fun of me, Note?”

“No, no, no. Not at all,” I denied in a hurry.

“Then what was that supposed to mean?”

“Just that I was sure a popular girl like you would have no trouble finding someone.”

“Really?” Miya asked, tilting her head to the side.

“Behold a woman’s feigned innocence!” Roslia declared.

“Hey, don’t twist this into something,” I scolded.

Personally, I had my doubts as to how Miya could be so oblivious to her own charm, but I summarily dismissed them. This was Miya, for goodness’ sake. There was no way she was just playing coy like Roslia was suggesting.

“Jeez, men are such suckers...” Roslia muttered to herself.

I pretended not to hear her.

“Ahaha. Well, if you think so, Note, maybe I’ll try to get a boyfriend,” Miya giggled, likewise ignoring Roslia.

Huh? That wasn’t intentional, was it?

“Will you cheer me on, Note?” Miya asked.

Come to think of it, this was the first time I’d ever discussed romance with Miya. We’d spent fifteen years together, but that was only just now hitting me. I’d spent so many days longing after her. I’d spent most of my life head over heels for her.

And in the past, I would have disingenuously offered her all the support in the world. I would’ve told her to seek out her heart’s desire, even though I didn’t mean it. I’d wanted her to be mine, after all. I’d known our relationship would never turn into anything more, yet I was never able to give up on those feelings.

But my answer was different now. I could say it from the bottom of my heart...

“Yeah. Go for it, Miya.”

I realized in that moment that the flames of my first love were long dead. It was a little sad.

*

Several days after that exchange, I ran into Eldrich at the adventurers guild. He was chatting with the receptionist when I walked in, but took notice of me right away.

“Oh, perfect timing. You’re Note, right?” he said. “There’s something I’d like to talk to you about if you have a moment to

spare.”

Roslia, Miya, and I always met up at the guild hall, but I'd arrived early today. That meant I was alone and had a little time to kill.

“I've got about ten minutes,” I answered honestly.

“Great. It's a bit loud at present, so how about we go upstairs?”

“I don't mind, but... is it something you can't discuss here?”

“Oh, no, nothing of the sort. No need for alarm.”

With that, Eldrich bowed to the receptionist and headed for the stairs beside the counter. I had no real reason to oblige other than the fact that I'd feel bad for not hearing the dude out. So I ended up following after him anyway.

On the second floor was a red-carpeted hallway with several doors on either side. Eldrich stopped at the second one from the stairs and opened it.

“These are the guild's meeting rooms. I asked the receptionist to let us borrow one just now.”

As we entered the room, Eldrich flipped the doorplate over to indicate it was in use.

“Huh... I didn't know you could borrow meeting rooms here,” I remarked.

“Well, not just anyone can. It's a courtesy the guild employees extend to certain adventurers. A perk of being on good terms, you could say.”

“Guess it's out of the question for me, then...”

Thanks to a certain loudmouth paladin, we had quite a reputation at the guild.

“Perhaps so,” Eldrich replied with a chuckle.

“Now, what did you want to talk about?” I asked once we'd both taken a seat on the sofa. “I imagine it has something to do with Miya, but...”

She was the only acquaintance we had in common. Other than the receptionist whose name I didn't know, that is.

“You would be correct,” Eldrich said with a serious expression. “But before I get to the heart of the matter, I'd first like to make it clear that I lay no blame on you.”

“Uh, okay...?”

“You see, Miya has been spending all of her time and energy helping you out recently. It's left our party in a bit of a fix. The Raiders haven't been able to take any work of late.”

“What? But Miya said everything was okay—” I said, stopping mid-sentence when it hit me. “Miya told me she was free because the Raiders were taking a break right now... Is that true?”

“No. I'm afraid the Raiders are, in fact, not on break at the moment,” Eldrich replied, his expression still stern.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize...”

“No need to apologize. It’s evident that Miya is the one at fault here.”

Was Eldrich mad at her? I was getting a little nervous. I mean, Miya *had* lied. That was obviously wrong, but she’d done it for my sake. She was neglecting her own party to help a childhood friend she didn’t even like out of the kindness of her heart... No, this exceeded the bounds of normal kindness. Something wasn’t right.

“Please don’t blame her, Eldrich. I’ll try talking to her.”

“You’re very kind,” Eldrich said with a smile. “Very well. I’ll entrust the matter to you, Note. Please convince Miya to come back to us. She’s a very important comrade.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Incidentally, how did she end up joining your party?”

“It’s not a particularly remarkable story. She simply responded to a recruitment poster the Raiders put up.”

“I see...”

“There aren’t many adventurers out there with Major Bow Mastery, Physical Boost, *and* a spirit magic skill. We accepted her immediately.”

“Huh...?”

“Is something the matter?” Eldrich asked in response to my reaction.

“No, it’s nothing,” I said, waving my hand to cover it up. “Don’t mind me.”

“If you’re certain, then... as I was saying, it’s a brief story. Miya joined us and has been a valuable member of the team ever since.”

“Thanks for telling me.”

“It’s nothing special, really. Now, let’s wrap things up here. Your cohorts will be arriving shortly, no?” Eldrich said, rising from the sofa.

“That’s right. I’ll try talking to Miya sometime today,” I replied, following suit. As we reached the door, I asked, “Actually, could I bother you about one more thing?”

“What is it?”

“Before you met me, did Miya ever say anything about having a childhood friend?”

“I’m afraid that was the first I heard of it,” he said with a strained smile.

“I see...” I could only reply with a halfhearted smile myself. “Well, I’m not sure I’ll be able to convince her in a single day, but I’ll try.”

“Resignation before the fact reduces your chances of success.”

“Yeah, you’re right...”

He was absolutely right. But if Miya felt the way I was worried she did, then...

This problem wasn't going to be an easy solve.

*

When Roslia, Miya, and I were on our way home after reporting our work to the guild for the day, I tried bringing it up.

"Say, Miya, there's something important I'd like to talk to you about..."

"Something important? What's up?"

I watched Miya turn back to face me and recalled my exchange with Eldrich earlier that morning. He'd been very clear when he'd said, "Miya has been spending all of her time and energy helping you out recently. It's left our party in a bit of a fix. The Raiders haven't been able to take any work of late." He'd even confirmed for me that Miya had lied about the Raiders being on break.

Miya was a Raiderer herself; her party activities should take top priority. It was wrong to inconvenience her fellow members because of personal business, even if she was trying to help out her childhood friend. I knew this was really my fault. There was something she needed to get off her chest. That was why she was sticking with us, but her kind nature kept her from bringing it up. She couldn't knowingly do something to hurt someone else... so I had to be the one to do it.

"I should've said this a long time ago," I began.

"What's with you all of a sudden?" she asked, waving her hand with a laugh. "You look so serious right now, Note."

If I'd wanted to, I could have followed her lead. I could've pretended this was nothing more than a joke. But that wouldn't help her in any way. I couldn't run from the issue here. I had to take the plunge.

"I need to apologize, Miya."

At those words, she fell silent. The smile vanished from her face. The lightness between us was gone in an instant. Roslia watched on without saying a word, observing from a few steps behind us.

"The day we went our separate ways, I said something awful to you and made you cry. And that's not all I did. While we were adventuring together, I relied entirely on you without doing a thing for myself."

It wasn't just the hurtful way I'd said goodbye. It was every moment that led up to it... I was apologizing for all of it, and it was long overdue.

"We promised we'd fulfill our dreams together, and I broke that promise. I'm sorry for that. Truly, deeply sorry."

There, I stopped in my tracks and bowed my head. I really should have done this sooner. Those should've been the first words out of my

mouth when we ran into each other.

Miya shouldn't be associating with the likes of me. She may have been helping us out, but she was part of another party. This arrangement would never last. She had no reason to go out of her way for me.

I knew that, and I'd made excuses over and over to avoid redressing the problem. I was in the wrong.

"Let me be clear, Miya. I'm not asking for forgiveness. You have every right to hate me. I'll hear anything you have to say."

That's right. I wasn't doing this for forgiveness. I just wanted Miya to make peace with the past so she could see the present for what it was.

I kept my head bowed low.

"..."

Silence hung between us for a long moment. I eventually looked up to see how Miya was reacting. When I did...

"What, is that all? You looked so serious there, you really took me by surprise!" she said, laughing it off as if it were nothing. "It's fine, Note. You don't have to apologize. It doesn't bother me. I mean, how far back are you trying to dig up? That's all in the past now."

"What are you saying...?"

"I'm not mad about it anymore. I got too emotional myself back then."

"But—"

"No buts! End of story. Okay?"

"No, that's not okay—"

"If you keep this up, I'm really going to get mad. I'm saying it doesn't bother me, and that's that. Understand?"

She shut me down without letting me get a word in edgewise. This... was an unexpected turn of events. My mind was going blank. I hardly knew how to respond.

"Is that all you had to say?" she asked.

"Yeah..." I eked out.

No, I have to say something else...

While I was panicking, Miya kept going, "See? Now Roslia doesn't know what to do. You shouldn't bring up serious stuff like that out of the blue."

"I don't mind," Roslia piped up.

"Oh, come now! There's no need to be so modest. You threw me for a loop too, Note," Miya said casually, linking her hands behind her head. "Now, let's talk about something nicer! I know, how about lunch? Where shall we go to eat tomorrow?"

And so, with a cheerful tone, Miya managed to sweep my earnest, heartfelt apology under the rug.

Our candid conversation continued for a short while after that. We walked together until we parted ways with Miya at the usual place.

Roslia then turned to me with a laugh and said, “Good for you, Note. Seems like you two were able to make up.”

What is she saying? She has no idea how wrong she is...

I slowly shook my head and replied, “Just the opposite. I missed our chance to make up. She’s still hurt so badly by what I did to her that she can’t face the past.”

“What makes you think that?” she asked.

What I was saying probably didn’t make sense to Roslia, who was none the wiser about what Eldrich had told me. She’d believed Miya when she said that the past didn’t bother her anymore—but I knew better. I knew that was a lie. The other lies she’d told were proof of it.

“I didn’t tell you that I ran into Eldrich at the guild this morning, Roslia,” I began to explain.

“That guy we talked to that one time?”

“Yeah, he said he wanted to discuss something with me... and that’s how I found out Miya’s been lying.”

“About what?” Roslia asked, curiously cocking her head to the side.

“Remember how she said she had free time because the Raiders were taking a break? She made that up. The Raiders have been active all this time—in other words, she’s been ditching them. That’s what Eldrich wanted to discuss.”

“Huh, so that’s the deal...” Roslia muttered with her hand over her mouth. “I mean, ditching your party isn’t cool, but it’s not really *that* big of a deal, is it? Maybe she’s just intent on helping us out so she can make up with you.”

“I would have thought the same if that’s all there was to it. I might’ve even thought she’d forgiven me... but that’s not the only lie she told.”

This was the part Eldrich didn’t know about. It wasn’t a lie she’d told me, but the Raiders.

“Miya lied to her party members about her skills. She told them she has inferior versions of what she’s really got in order to make herself seem weaker.”

I remembered it clearly. Eldrich had said, “There aren’t many adventurers out there with Major Bow Mastery, Physical Boost, *and* a spirit magic skill.” But that wasn’t right. Miya had Superior Bow Mastery. I’d seen it on the divine slate during her presentation ceremony with my own eyes.

She also had Major Physical Boost and Protection of the Forest Spirit King, both of which were extremely valuable. Either one alone

would guarantee someone a successful career as an adventurer. So I found it strange that Eldrich had described them so casually as “Physical Boost” and “a spirit magic skill.” Major Physical Boost and Protection of the Forest Spirit King were certainly worthy of being mentioned by name. Miya had probably lied about those too.

“That’s...”

Roslia was understandably surprised at this discovery for herself. In adventuring, it was taboo to lie to your fellow party members about your skills. When you adventured with someone, you were trusting them with your life and vice versa. To lie about your abilities was unthinkable.

Granted, the offense was usually *overstating* one’s skills. I wasn’t sure how it applied to Miya, who’d lied to make her skills seem inferior. Not many people would purposefully do that. It was such a rare case that neither Roslia nor I were sure what to make of it.

“I thought something was strange from the start,” I said. “With an almighty skill set like Miya’s, I had to wonder why she hadn’t made a bigger name for herself.”

Miya was blessed with a lineup of skills so peerless that she was likely unmatched by but ten other people in the entire world. And yet I hadn’t heard her lauded on the street once in the six months I’d been living in this city.

The same went for the Raiders. They were the biggest name in the capital, but people only ever talked about Eldrich. I didn’t know what skills the guy had, but there was no realistic way that he completely overshadowed Miya.

“That’s why I think Miya’s hidden her skills from the Raiders.”

As for the reason she’d done it...

“It has to be my fault. I abandoned our dream because I couldn’t keep up with her, and that deeply affected her. She wouldn’t go so far out of her way to lie otherwise.”

Perhaps upon joining the Raiders, she’d wanted to avoid making the same mistake twice. She’d crushed the dream right out of someone with her superior skill set, and she couldn’t bear the thought of doing it again. That was why she’d lowered herself to live like an average adventurer.

It was the complete opposite of how I’d joined the Arrivers. I’d sworn to work hard in order to improve myself. To accept and be accepted. I believed in the Arrivers—I had all the way until the bitter end. The Arrivers had saved me.

But Miya... She didn’t trust the Raiders. She’d joined them under a pretense that she kept up to this day. She diminished herself in their presence. That wasn’t their fault, however. It wasn’t a shortcoming on their part. Surely Eldrich was every bit as talented as Jin. Surely the

other Raiders were all nicer than Force.

Salvation was sometimes a matter of luck and timing. If the cogs of fate had been the slightest bit out of alignment, our positions easily could have been reversed. Miya could be living up to her full potential with the Raiders, earning a reputation as the strongest adventurer in the capital. The Arrivers could have left me in the dust, condemning me to a dull life of playing pack mule for lesser parties. Those were both very real scenarios.

“What I’m saying is that Miya’s past is weighing her down. The burden is so unbearable that she wouldn’t even *listen* to me apologize earlier. She can’t face it.”

When Miya tried to brush it off as “all in the past,” that wasn’t an acceptance of things. It was denial. She’d been hurt. She was still hurt. She thought everything would be fine if she just ignored it and toughed it out.

But that’s not how this works. That’s not how you overcome the past.

“What should I do? I want Miya to face the present, unfettered by what’s happened. Otherwise, she’s just going to keep living a painful lie.”

That was how I’d lived when I first came to the capital. I was dragging Jin’s death behind me. I boxed up all my wonderful memories of the Arrivers in order to force myself into a “normal” life. I thought that was what I needed in order to be happy... but I couldn’t have been further from it. Every day was misery.

“If I’m the one who originally hurt her, do you think I can help her now? Is there a way I can save her, Roslia?”

“Hard to say. This is between the two of you. I’m not sure a third party like me has any business trying to give you advice here.”

“Yeah...”

Roslia was right. This was between me and Miya. I wasn’t going to strike an easy solution just by asking someone else for the answer.

“There’s one thing I will say, Note, even if it’s not really my place... Is what happened *really* that big of a deal to you two?”

“Huh?” That seemingly basic question left me stupefied. “Of course it’s a big deal—”

“From what I’ve heard, it sounds like you had a perfectly normal fight. You didn’t have the same motivation for adventuring anymore, so you broke it off. I know of at least ten other parties that have split up the same way. You just haven’t been able to reconcile, which leaves you both in a situation where you’re stuck in the past in the worst way.”

That was indeed an objective assessment of the situation. But I had a personal stake in this. As someone who’d suffered through the

pain of it, I *couldn't* be objective.

"But that was the first time I said something so awful to Miya. That's why it hurt her so—"

"That was really the first time you'd ever said something like that to her? Had you never fought before?"

"I don't think so... Now that you mention it, I don't even think we bickered when we were little."

Miya and I grew up in the small village of Changs. There were no other children our age, so we were always together. It might be presumptuous of me to say we always got along, but I did what I could to keep the peace.

"Then that's probably how this got so blown out of proportion. If you two had never fought before, *of course* you didn't know how to make up. Now, let me ask you a different question... Do you really think it's normal to go fifteen years without one single argument? Shouldn't you have been through, like, everything by then?"

"That's..."

She had a point there.

I'd been in love with Miya for as long as I could remember. I'd spent my life trying to avoid conflict so that I wouldn't hurt her. I'd thought that was the right thing to do. That everything was fine that way. But in retrospect, it really wasn't. It was why we made those mistakes when we were younger... and why we continued to make them now.

"I get it... We were all wrong from the start. That's why acting like we did in the old days didn't work out either. I've screwed up."

I'd been talking to Miya like nothing had ever happened. I hid my history with the Arrivers, and continued to behave like the weakling I'd always been. I'd accepted the fact that it was all my fault, and I'd tried to apologize to her for it... Meaning that nothing had really changed from the past. We'd only end up hurting each other more if we kept up this warped relationship.

"Thank you, Roslia. I think I finally understand now."

"No thanks necessary. I didn't say anything that wasn't obvious, you know."

I wasn't sure whether Roslia was being modest or trying to avoid responsibility—maybe both. Either way, she'd clued me in to something valuable. Her words were the first ray of hope I saw shining on my dim relationship with Miya.

"All right. Then we'll just say you've helped me see the obvious."

"Good, because I'm not going to be happy if my meddling advice somehow ends up making things even worse."

"Hold your horses there. Things are probably going to get a lot worse from here."

What Miya and I needed wasn't a reset. We didn't need to make up and start over. We needed to dismantle our relationship entirely and settle things once and for all. I would sever what was holding her back... even if that meant cutting her loose entirely.

"Wait, you're planning on making things *worse*?!" Roslia exclaimed.

"I may even break them off permanently," I replied.

"And you're really okay with that? Are you sure?" she asked worriedly.

"It's fine. Things were broken to begin with... We just happened to run into each other, and that gave us the opportunity to talk again. But since I have this chance, don't you think it's fitting for an adventurer to go out on an all-or-nothing gamble?"

"Just what do you think adventurers are?" she asked. She was shaking her head in an exasperated fashion, but there was a smile on her face. "You know, I think you make a really great adventurer after all, Note. You've got the perfect personality for it."

"Really? If anything, I'd say the opposite." I was sensitive, and I easily fell into slumps. I was pretty pathetic and unreliable even by my own assessment. "I feel like adventurers are supposed to be more hearty and heroic."

"It's true that you're not very heroic..." Roslia said, trailing off before continuing, "but you do the craziest things. Maybe you don't see it for yourself."

"It's not intentional..."

Honestly, I was somewhat self-aware. In fact, after Roslia pointed it out, I was more sure of it than ever. There was truly no one less suited for adventuring than me.

"I know. So, Note, I have no idea what you're up to this time... but please don't be too reckless."

"It's fine. I'm sure it won't be anything a little healing magic can't fix."

"Just what kind of trouble are you getting yourself into?!"

Well, given what I was thinking of doing... I might end up skewered with an arrow or two.

Settling the Past

I've never really liked Note Athlon.

The story starts back when we lived in our hometown, the village of Changs. He was timid. Weak, spineless, helpless. He was unable to make decisions for himself, always following someone else around. Even if he actually had something to complain about, he'd keep it to himself without ever saying a word.

There was a lot I didn't like about him—plenty more, in fact. But it's not as though I hated him. I just didn't like him very much. That's the best way I could describe it.

There weren't many other kids in our village. It was mostly just the two of us. So what would happen to us when we grew up? With no other boys my age, as long as I stayed in the village, I would eventually end up marrying Note. My younger self worried about that a lot.

For a childhood friend, Note wasn't a bad person. He wasn't mean to me or anything. In fact, he was always putting me first. He was just lacking as a romantic partner. I wanted someone more reliable. I liked masculine men with positive attitudes. So that's why my younger self decided to leave the village—to find someone worth marrying.

My plan was to become an adventurer. My parents had a lot of influence on that. I admired their profession, and I figured they'd allow me to go if I said that I wanted to follow in their footsteps. And since I was leaving town, I figured at the time that I should take Note along.

I'd known from the start that he was in love with me. He was always following me around. The way he talked and the way he behaved only made it more obvious, though he seemed to think he hid it well.

Not even I could do something as cruel as leave the boy who loved me behind, stranded in that village. No... I was more calculating than that. A cunning woman who knew what it took to get people to like her and act the way she wanted.

Yet after having Note by my side for so many years, I admit I'd developed something of an attachment to him. I had no intention of marrying him, of course, but I pitied him for being doomed to walk through life alone. That's why I tempted him into sharing my dream of leaving the village to become a top-tier adventurer.

Like I said, I didn't hate Note. I didn't hate the idea of becoming adventurers together, either. If anything, having a pawn in my corner was convenient. Besides, we'd already known each other for years. It was way better than adventuring with strangers.

Would Note ever fall in love with another girl? That was my only concern. I thought I was pretty cute, if I did say so myself. I may not have been nice, but I sure looked the part. Note liking me also gave me confidence.

Would he be depressed if I got a boyfriend? Sure he would. He'd put on a brave face, but he'd be devastated on the inside. What was I to do, then, if he never gave up on me? What if he never found someone else to marry?

Note was hopeless without me. He couldn't make decisions for himself. It was probably because we grew up together, just the two of us. He was completely reliant on me. I couldn't imagine him ever following another woman around like he did me.

So what would I do if he had his heart absolutely set on me? Would I have to accept that responsibility? I knew I wouldn't be able to abandon him. I'd probably end up sacrificing my own happiness for his. I'd probably marry him out of pity.

But that wasn't the future I wanted. Because I, Miya Line, never really liked my childhood friend.

My younger self—in the days before Note and I split up—used to think that way. Looking back on it now, I was a fool. Note needed me. That's what I'd believed, but I was oh-so wrong. I was nothing more than a childhood friend to him, and I didn't realize it until the day he told me goodbye.

When it happened, I didn't really think that Note wanted to part ways. I only mentioned it to spur him along. As something of a scolding for leaving all the monsters and the fighting to me. I thought if I scared him a little, he'd panic and get his act together.

Perhaps I was angry that he'd forgotten his promise to me. Perhaps that's why I took a more forceful approach than usual. I was sure he'd do what I wanted, just like always, and pull himself up by his bootstraps as a result.

But again, I was oh-so wrong. For the first time in our lives, Note yelled at me. He wasn't just unleashing something he'd been bottling up since we started adventuring. It was fifteen years' worth of discontent. It was the first time he'd ever turned against me since the day he was born.

I'd been thoroughly convinced that Note was in love with me, yet that confidence was destroyed in an instant. I was so utterly shaken that I said something I didn't really mean. I said something that I

knew would hurt him without even thinking, and when I did... I could see his anger flare right before my very eyes. Our argument escalated into something neither of us could stop.

It all came to an end with my tearful departure. I don't even remember what I said as I left. "I can't do this with you anymore, Note," or something along those lines. It wasn't how I truly felt. It was our very first argument, but I was sure Note would come crawling back to apologize the next day. Then we'd make up and everything would be fine.

That's what I genuinely believed, yet no matter how long I waited, he never came back. And at some point while I was waiting for him, he started taking jobs with other random adventurers. That's when it finally set in on me that I'd been abandoned.

I personally had no intention of abandoning Note myself. I didn't particularly like him, but he was hopeless without me. He'd never make it on his own. He'd be too pitiful if I deserted him. I couldn't do that to him. That's what I'd believed—what I'd mistakenly believed for so many years.

But in reality, Note didn't need me. Once I realized that, I couldn't stay in Broad any longer. I felt like I'd been betrayed. I never wanted to see his face or hear his name again, so I ran. I got as far away from Broad as I could.

I thought, "Who cares about Note anymore? He'll realize what he's missing once I'm gone." And with that, I made my way to the capital and formed a party with strangers for the first time in my life.

For two years after that, I tried to the best of my ability to forget my childhood friend—that ungrateful, heartless, backstabbing bastard. How did *he* end up abandoning *me*? It should have been the other way around. It almost made it seem like I was the one who needed him.

I was pissed off. I'd looked down on Note so much that my pride was in tatters. I wanted to prove him wrong. I wanted to make him regret abandoning me.

Driven by that singular purpose, I applied to join the Raiders on the spur of the moment. I didn't really consider them to be my true allies—they were simply a means to prove my superiority. That was why I lied about my skills and took care to keep my abilities under wraps. I didn't want to crush them like I had Note. I just wanted to rub the Raiders' name in his face.

So I was happy when the Raiders made it up to gold rank. Now, I was sure, Note would rue what he'd done. I was delighted from the bottom of my heart. That's why I couldn't help smiling when I spotted him at the adventurers guild. "Finally," I thought. "Finally, I'll have my revenge. He may have followed me here, but it's too late to apologize now. I'll never forgive him. He can cry and beg on his knees

all he wants, but it won't work."

But my joy was short-lived.

Note hadn't followed me to the capital. On the contrary, he took one look at me and tried to run. He even ignored me when I first called out to him. Moreover, he had a cute girl with him. And worse yet, they were about to start adventuring together.

This isn't right. Who is that girl? I should be the one standing there. I'm the one you promised to become top-tier adventurers with. What are you doing, taking her by the hand and trying to run off? You stopped trying to take my hand years ago... You gave up making eye contact, too. You always averted your gaze, but now you're not looking away at all. You think I'm cute? You've never said that before. The Note I knew would've been too embarrassed. Have you fallen out of love with me? Have you moved on to that girl instead? You'd take anyone as long as they stayed with you?

My discontent started bubbling up inside me bit by bit. Why was I so frustrated? I almost felt like I'd been betrayed a second time. Upset and bereft of any good way to vent my anger, I decided to be mean.

I thought I'd get between Note and Roslia to destroy their relationship. I thought once I had Note under my thumb, Roslia would see the light and dump him. That was why I offered to help out with their job requests, and that was in turn how I came to learn the strength of the bond they shared.

For some reason, Roslia trusted Note completely. There was no getting between them.

Why was that? Why did she trust him so much? Note still couldn't fight monsters. He was so unmotivated that he even forgot his dagger once. He couldn't say no to anything. He just let people walk all over him.

Why are you following a guy like this around? What attracts you to him?

Note was supposed to be in love with me. I was supposed to be the only one who understood him. And yet, before I knew it, some woman had shown up out of the blue and taken my place.

Just how had things turned out like this? This wasn't the future I wanted. If I'd known this was how it was going to be, I never would've left the village. I never should've become an adventurer. If Note was just going to cast me aside like this, if I was just going to end up feeling like this... then we should've just stayed in Changs together.

Where did I go wrong? Where did I screw it all up? Is it really impossible for things to go back to the way they were...?

Such were the doubts I continued to carry in my heart.

When I arrived at our usual meeting spot, Note called out to me...

"Hey, Miya. We're taking a break from jobs today."

"What's up?" I asked. "Why all of a sudden?"

"I'd like to talk to you more about what happened. In the past, I mean."

I didn't really want to talk about the past, though. It wasn't like I was interested in making up. All I wanted was to make Note regret abandoning me.

"I already told you it's fine. It doesn't bother me."

Of course, I couldn't say what I truly felt. I brushed it off with a laugh. However, Note ignored my show of consideration and pressed the matter further.

"That's a lie, isn't it?"

"It's not."

"Then why are you helping us with our job requests?"

For a second, I was worried Note had seen through me. Considering things rationally, however, I realized that wasn't possible. Note was dull. In fifteen years, he'd never once seen me for who I really was. There was no way he could see the dark emotions swirling in my chest at that very moment.

"Because you were in a pickle, silly."

"And that was enough to make you ditch the Raiders?"

"That's..."

I hadn't realized Note knew that much. Like I said, he was dull. There was no way he'd picked up on it on his own. Eldrich or someone must have told him.

"I guess you caught me! I wanted to help you get your rank up, so I'm taking a bit of a break."

"Would you normally go that far for a childhood friend who broke their promise and said horrible things to you?"

Seems like he's not backing down today...

Despite my annoyance, I answered him with a fake smile, "I told you none of that bothers me. Isn't it only natural to help out an old friend in need?"

"If it doesn't bother you, then why did you lie to Eldrich and the other Raiders?"

"I just wanted to help you—"

"Not that lie. I'm talking about your skills. You didn't cop to your real skill set, did you?"

"..."

He knew even more than I'd thought he did. I was losing it a little. I could feel my face twitching.

“My betrayal still bothers you, doesn’t it? That’s why you’re hiding your true abilities from the Raiders.”

“Wh...”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to hide it anymore. I think I’ve got the picture now.”

No way. You don’t know anything, Note. If you did, you would’ve broken up with Roslia and come back to me already. It’s my turn to abandon you this time.

“There’s something you want to say to me, right?” he continued. “I’m sure you have more than a few grievances.”

Of course I did. It would’ve taken me years to air them all. But if I did that, Note would be completely disillusioned with me, and that wasn’t the result I wanted.

“Maybe a little,” I admitted. “But nothing actually worth complaining about.”

“I guess you wouldn’t be honest with me...”

Note’s shoulders slumped, even though I was the one who felt like sighing here.

Enough already, Note. I don’t want to talk about the past. Just do what I want you to. Just like you used to.

“Say, Miya...”

“...What?”

“Do you want to try fighting?”

“What do you mean?” I was confused by the sudden, incomprehensible question. “Why would we do that?”

“Because we’ve barely fought before now. In fact, I think the only time we ever did was the incident in Broad.”

“Maybe so, but...”

“I don’t think that’s a good thing. You’ve probably pent up a lot since we were kids. And I think it’s because we both kept bottling stuff up that things turned out this way, don’t you?”

He’s talking about how our discontented clash led to us going our separate ways...

“I understand what you’re trying to say, Note, but I don’t want to fight. I don’t want to get hurt, and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Likewise. But I think we’re a little past that stage. Our relationship is so twisted now that I don’t think there’s any clean way to solve this, you know?”

Oh, I knew. Obviously. That was why I wanted to see him suffer the same pain I’d felt, then walk away and forget it all. That would be the perfect ending to this. No need for any more fights.

“For starters, Note, fighting isn’t something you just ‘try.’”

“That’s right...”

“How do you want to fight, anyway? Have a shouting match or

something?"

"No... I figure we'll let our fists do the talking."

"Let our fists do the talking? You mean like a brawl?"

Had Note gone funny in the head? If we actually threw down, I'd wipe the floor with him courtesy of Physical Boost. He'd get beaten black and blue.

"A proper fight, yeah. Weapons, arts, everything. Going all out will feel better, right?"

"If we did that, you'd seriously get hurt."

"That's what Roslia's here for. You can use healing spells, right?"

"Yup. I was a priestess for a while," volunteered Roslia, who'd been silent all this time, as she raised her hand.

"There you have it," concluded Note.

"But even with healing spells," I objected, "you might die if I go all out."

"I'll try my best not to..." he said with a strained smile.

See? He clearly wasn't in his right mind. This was just some hare-brained whim.

"I can't go all out against you, Note."

"Hmm... There seems to be something of a misunderstanding here."

"Huh? Like what?"

"Everything you've said so far seems to presume you'll be the victor. Why is that?"

"Why? Because..."

"Just so you know, I'll be going all out too. And I don't intend to lose."

"...!"

I reflexively clenched my fists. I had to calm down. This was just petty provocation. He was bluffing to get me to agree to fight. He didn't *really* think he could win.

"I have some stuff to get off my chest too, Miya. I wouldn't challenge you to a losing match."

I can't fall for this...

"Say what you will, Note, but I've seen how you handle monsters. You haven't gotten any stronger in the last two years. That's why I'm pretty confident about winning."

That's right. He hadn't grown at all. He still couldn't defeat a single monster.

"Or are you just scared of losing to me?" he dared to ask.

"Don't come crying to me after I crush you, you hear?"

I... fell for it.

I was a fool. What was I thinking? I just couldn't suppress my anger anymore.

“That’s more like it,” he said.

“You’re sure about allowing me to use my bow and spirit magic?”

“Of course.”

“Just so you know, if you don’t set a handicap, I *will* win.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth, Miya.”

“...!”

“I have an idea. For your handicap, let’s fight in the forest. That way, you can give 120 percent.”

“You’re really going to regret this...”

Why was my childhood friend so good at irritating people? I was honestly ready to punch him in the face with all my might.

“I sure am looking forward to beating you, Miya.”

“Now’s your only chance to play it cool.”

“Yeah, yeah. Do your best, okay?”

What was he doing taunting me? *He* was the one in trouble here. That was it... I made up my mind then and there that I wouldn’t hold back. I was absolutely going to win.

This wasn’t how I’d wanted things to go, but it might turn out all the better. Thrashing Note was going to feel great. Then I could put the past behind me once and for all.

Maybe that was precisely Note’s plan... The thought vexed me, but I’d give him what he wanted.

*

“This should be a good spot, right?” Note asked.

He’d led us to a wild field in the forest outside the city. At first glance, it seemed the perfect place to fight. There was a clearing about ten meters wide with nothing but short grass growing, surrounded by dense trees on all sides. So this was going to be our stage, was it?

“You want to fight here, Note?”

“The lack of trees should make it easier for you to fire, but we’re still technically in the forest, so you should still get your skill buff too.”

He wanted to fight under the most advantageous conditions for me? What in the world was he thinking? There was no way he actually intended to win.

“Are you serious?” I couldn’t help asking.

“Serious about what?”

“If you want to play the fool, then fine. You’ll regret it later.”

“Sure, sure.” There, Note turned and took ten paces from me.

“Let’s get to it, then.”

He then held his dagger up at the ready—at least he hadn’t forgotten it today.

“Okay,” I agreed, grabbing my bow from my back and drawing an

arrow from my quiver.

“Where should I stand?” Roslia piped up.

Note replied, “Anywhere on the sidelines.”

“Is there even really a need for me to be here? Aren’t I just going to get in the way of your duel?” she asked.

“No, we need a healer on standby in case someone gets hurt,”

Note assured her.

“I also have healing spirit magic too, you know?” I interjected.

“Come to think of it, you’re right. In that case, Roslia, you’ll be the referee.”

“All right. I shall judge things extremely fairly,” she declared, taking her place at the edge of the clearing. She stood leaning against a tree, arms folded.

It seemed she intended to be an impartial observer. She wasn’t in striking distance, so I could fight without concern. With that settled, I looked in front of me once more.

Note met my gaze. We were now about ten meters apart—arrows would be quite effective at this range. As long as I could maintain the distance, I’d have this fight in the bag with just my bow and arrows.

Granted, Note wasn’t going to just stand there and let me shoot him. He’d definitely try to close the gap. But as long as I kept out of arm’s reach, he’d never win with just a dagger.

The terrain here wasn’t so bad. It was grassy, but relatively easy to run on. Note might make a mad dash for me the moment the fight began. That wouldn’t be a problem, though. I had Major Physical Boost. I’d keep calm and overpower him once he got close.

And that was only *if* he could get through the volley of arrows he’d face on the way to me. Even if he ran at full speed, I’d be able to get off at least two shots—and I was confident I only needed one.

No matter how I looked at the situation, my victory was all but assured.

“Are you both ready?” Roslia asked, raising her hand high. Note and I nodded in response. “Then let the match begin!”

On cue, I nocked my arrow. Everything would be decided with this. But I couldn’t aim for Note’s face—that would kill him. I decided to go for his feet instead. I predicted where he’d land after leaping forward and then let my arrow fly.

“Pseudo Shadow Runner!” I heard him say before a shadow covered his body, then seemingly vanished.

Oh no!

Suddenly sensing a threat, I instinctively jumped back with all my might. My reflexes were honed from years of being an adventurer. I strained my eyes, desperately trying to catch a glimpse of Note.

He’s gone... What just happened?

Anxiety welled within me. I strained my eyes harder, scouring the clearing.

What was that just now? An art? Did it make him invisible? He said, "Pseudo Shadow Runner." I've never heard of that before... Calm down, Miya. Think rationally. He wants you to panic right now.

I wasn't sure what it was, but Note had used an unknown art to catch me by surprise. It seemed all his bluffing hadn't been for nothing... He was actually taking this fight seriously.

That wouldn't make up for the disparity between our skills, however. If I kept my cool and took this one blow at a time, I couldn't lose.

First things first, I had to locate him. I wouldn't be able to attack or defend if I didn't know where he was. I carefully scanned the open field. There was nothing to hide behind for cover here.

So where is he? Above me? No... There are no branches overhead. That means he's in the forest, huh?

I took a glance at the trees encircling the clearing. There were plenty of places to hide in the woods...

I'd miscalculated. I had assumed Note would charge me first thing, but he'd actually done the opposite. He put even more distance between us and concealed himself in the forest. I'd have a harder time hitting him between the trees—he'd pointed out as much himself.

This was an effective tactic to neutralize my archery. But that was only one tool in my arsenal. It didn't apply to my other abilities.

"Presence Detection!"

Presence Detection was a key hunter art for locating targets. With it, I would be able to see the presences of monsters and people around me—

Nothing...? How can that be? I can't see anything at all...

I quickly activated another search art, Super Senses. Yet even with that, I still couldn't find anything. Was Note not in the forest after all? If not, where had he gone? It really was like he'd vanished into thin air...

"Roslia, Note's disappeared. What do we do about our duel?"

"There's nothing I can do about that..."

A sudden chill ran down my spine. I had a premonition of my own head going flying.

Once again, my body moved reflexively. I rolled to get away from where I was standing, but all was well. I looked myself over to confirm it. I wasn't hurt anywhere. Note hadn't really attacked me... He'd just hit me with a wave of bloodlust.

And that was only now setting in on me. He'd done something similar when he first disappeared. But if he was doing it again, that meant he still had to be somewhere nearby. It seemed he wasn't out of

the fight just yet after all.

I'd asked Roslia about the status of our match, so he was speaking up for himself loud and clear.

It seemed Note had become a thief after we split ways. I vaguely recalled an art by the name Stealth that allowed thieves to mask their presence. That had to be what Note was using to hide.

But even then, I was pretty sure I should still be able to pick him out with both Presence Detection and Super Senses... Maybe there was some kind of trick to it. I'd heard of the notorious assassin known as the Headhunter whose Stealth couldn't be seen through by anyone, so there had to be exceptions.

I looked in the direction the bloodlust had come from just now, pinpointing it to a single tree. I drew back my bow and paused right before releasing my arrow.

I can't get hasty...

Note would have relocated immediately after flashing his bloodlust. There was no way he was still in the same place. If I fired now, I'd just be giving him an opportunity to ambush me. He was biding his time, waiting for the perfect chance to finish this with one blow. Typical thief tactics.

In that regard, I had to reassess my opinion of Note. He definitely had his battle style basics down. He must have found a great mentor somewhere. Too bad that wouldn't be enough to win against me.

In the end, victory was decided by ability. Even a thief's crafty fighting style had its weaknesses.

"Esmeralda!"

All I needed was a wide-area spell. If Note was hiding in the trees, then I'd flatten the entire forest. That's right. I was going with something even more devastating than Esmeralda-Viento-Huracán.

"Sorry, Roslia, could you protect yourself?" I called out.

"Are you serious right now?" she replied. "If you use that, Note will..."

She was trembling at the sight of the magical energy gathering around me—and with good reason. No way was Note going to survive this unscathed. Surely he'd leap out of hiding to stop me... and that's when I'd get him.

He was quietly waiting for me to give him an opening, so I was going to force him to give me one instead. Thieves didn't have defensive magic. They couldn't block spells or attacks like Roslia.

So come on out, Note! Let's finish this!

And yet... he didn't come. He must have sensed my intent and determined I was just bluffing in an attempt to get him out in the open. If that was the case, I wasn't going to show any mercy. I'd crush him with everything I had.

“Viento!”

If he wouldn’t come out, I’d just fire my spell for real.

“Impenetrable Fortress!”

Once I was sure she had her defenses up, I designated my spell phenomenon.

“Tempestad!”

The magical energy around me began to whirl into a vortex. Esmeralda-Viento-Huracán was an advanced spell, but this—Esmeralda-Viento-Tempestad—was the highest caliber magic I could use. Once I activated it, all that was left was to wait for destruction.

The wind whipped and roared, tearing through the trees and ground like fangs. Branches and stones danced through the air, blacking out the sky as the tempest raged.

I momentarily wondered if Roslia would be okay. Her Impenetrable Fortress was quite sturdy. I was really impressed the first time I saw it. Not even the Raiders had someone with a defensive spell that tough. Surely she’d be fine. I’d only proceeded with this plan because I had faith in her. Note, however... He had no way of blocking my magic. He wasn’t like Roslia—he was a have-not.

Had he fled while I was chanting my spell? If not, he might be dead. Surely he wasn’t that dumb. Surely someone as cowardly as Note had run away. And surely, after witnessing the power of my magic, he would accept his defeat.

My victory was all but decided at this point. Note should’ve come at me before I used my spirit magic, even if it seemed hopeless. He would’ve stood a better chance of winning then... or so I thought as I looked around at the carnage I’d wrought.

It looked like the aftermath of a natural disaster. There wasn’t a single tree left standing around us. It was utter devastation. There was nary a sign of life within several hundred meters. The storm had destroyed everything in its path.

“You okay, Roslia?” I called to the wall of light standing tall among the fallen trees.

The light disappeared, revealing Roslia huddled within it.

“I’m fine, but—” she said, stopping abruptly as she looked around.

There was nothing to see but the ruins of nature. There was absolutely no sign of Note.

“Are you alive, Note?!” I shouted through my cupped hands, hoping my voice would reach him wherever he’d run off to. “If you are, show yourself!”

“If you say so...” replied a whisper.

It was right behind me—right in my ear. I wanted to turn around, but my body froze at the sensation of cold metal against my neck.

“You have to admit this is my win, right?”

It was Note. He'd gotten his dagger to my throat before I even knew what was happening. I'd left myself wide open from behind. My life was now completely in his hands. I swallowed back my confusion and admitted defeat.

“...I surrender...”



Where Their Fates Led

Somehow, everything had worked out.

I lowered my dagger from Miya's neck and sighed in relief. For the first time in my life, I'd gotten one over on her. I'd won. I couldn't help the joy welling up within me.

"How..." Miya mumbled as she fell to her knees. "How did I lose...?"

She'd never seen this coming. I could only imagine what a shock it was to her.

"How did I lose against Note? I'm so much stronger..."

I knew that better than anyone—I wasn't stronger than Miya just because I'd beaten her.

"My strategy was simply better," I said.

"Your strategy?" she asked.

"Yeah. Thanks to you agreeing to fight on my terms."

The outcome of our match was decided ahead of time. Unlike Miya, I had time to prepare before our duel. When I made up my mind to fight her for real, I figured the best way to do it would be in single combat. That way I could show Miya how strong I'd become, that I didn't need her help anymore, and she could have some peace of mind leaving my side.

This plan, however, required that I *win*. I had to overpower her while she was using her full strength.

"If we fought a hundred times under normal circumstances, I wouldn't be able to score a single win against you."

And so I'd searched for a way I could beat Miya. What advantage did I have? The only answer was that she didn't know what I was truly capable of. Pseudo Shadow Runner, Stealth, Bloodlust, and all my evasion arts... Miya didn't know I could use any of them. If I fought using those, I just might catch her by surprise.

Since I functionally couldn't use any attack arts, I would never win in an honest fight. I knew I'd have to get behind Miya and get her to surrender instead. That was my goal going into the fight.

Now, getting behind Miya meant getting close to her. I considered opening with Pseudo Shadow Runner and closing the distance immediately, but Miya had Major Physical Boost. Approaching her carelessly could have been the end of me in a single hit. I didn't want to take such a risky bet right off the bat.

That left me with Stealth—meaning I just had to wait for the right opportunity to sneak around her. I figured I'd play it like the Headhunter.

"I was settled on a Stealth ambush from the very beginning, which is why I wanted to fight here in the forest with all its cover and obstructions."

"So you *were* bluffing when you chose this location to bring out my full strength."

"Well, that was part of it. But mostly, I just wanted to capitalize on my Stealth. It was a big help that you didn't figure that out."

A proper duel required a certain amount of space, so I'd scouted out a clearing in the middle of the woods on purpose. Fortunately, that was a breeze with Mapping.

"You were never going to rush me at the start, then. It was your plan to run into the forest all along."

"Yup."

I'd drawn my dagger at the start to give Miya the wrong idea. As soon as the battle began, I activated Pseudo Shadow Runner and fled the other way. I even used Bloodlust to throw her off and give me a chance to escape. That was how I'd managed to avoid Miya's first arrow.

"So everything went according to your little strategy..."

"There *was* one thing I didn't expect."

"And what was that?"

"While I was hiding, you asked Roslia about our duel. I panicked a little then."

"But that's it, right?"

Yup. I'd managed to convey to Miya with a little bit of Bloodlust that I was still in the fight, and things proceeded from there.

"Say, Note, I used my spirit magic there at the end... Did you predict that too?"

"Uh-huh. I knew you'd resort to that if I stayed in hiding."

"So you were just waiting for me to do that..."

"It was basically the only opportunity I'd have against you."

"But how did you defend against it? That's the part I can't figure out."

"Well..."

"You can't tell me?"

"I can, but it was a little unfair of me..."

"How so?"

"I didn't defend against it. I just took cover."

"Where?" Miya asked, looking around at the forest she'd flattened. "There was nowhere to hide."

"No, there was," I said, pointing at Roslia. "I knew she'd protect

herself with Impenetrable Fortress if you used a wide-area spell. I was behind her.”

“Huh?! You hid behind me?!” Roslia yelled.

“Roslia didn’t know either, you see...”

“I was supposed to be the referee, Note! That’s clearly cheating!”

“Is it *really*?”

“Of course it is!”

I had no other way of withstanding Miya’s spell, though. That was why I’d brought Roslia along under the pretense of having a healer on hand. I’d even made sure to position her at the edge of the clearing for easy access.

“It’s fine,” said Miya. “I lost. Everything went just as Note planned. I have no choice but to accept defeat.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s not like I can say anything else...”

With her head hung low, she dropped her bow to the ground. But then, all of a sudden...

“Argh! How annoying! How utterly, absolutely infuriating!” she yelled, jerking her head back up. “How could I lose to you?! How did you get so much stronger while I wasn’t around?! You should have just stayed the weakling you always were!”

Miya pounded her fist against the ground with all her might. She was so strong that it sent dirt flying.

“I really do hate you after all! I never liked you in the first place! You were always following me around! You couldn’t make a single decision for yourself! You were a coward! Pathetic! Why was the only other kid my age in our village *you*?!”

I was shocked into silence by her sudden outburst. Roslia was similarly stunned.

“Then at our presentation ceremonies, you went and pulled a trash skill! You couldn’t take a single job without me! You had no motivation whatsoever! And when I called you on it, you snapped on me and disappeared!”

“That was because you said we should walk our own paths—”

“I was testing you! I wasn’t being serious! But then you went and started working with other parties!”

“...How would I know that if you don’t tell me?”

“Even if you didn’t know any better, how could you just disappear like that?! Did I really mean so little to you, Note?!”

She was wrong. Miya was my everything back then. That’s why leaving her left me so hollow. I was a helpless shell of misery and hurt.

“And when we were finally reunited, you tried to ignore me, didn’t you?!”

“That’s...”

I hadn’t ignored her because I disliked her. I was just too ashamed to face her. That was why I’d tried to run.

“I don’t want to hear your excuses! There you were all of a sudden, with some strange woman I didn’t know! Trying to become an adventurer again, no less! What about your promise with me?!”

I’d long assumed it was void. I wasn’t trying to break it a second time.

“And even when we started doing jobs together, you didn’t pull your weight at all! You didn’t even try to fight the monsters! I had every reason to think you hadn’t changed!” Miya continued to yell in a tantrum. “But then you go and beat me in a fight?! The Note I know isn’t strong! You should have just kept relying on me forever! You should’ve always stayed the same weak boy who couldn’t do anything without me! I didn’t want you to get stronger!”

“Sorry...” I could only apologize earnestly.

“That! That too! Why aren’t you mad right now?! How can you be so calm?! Aren’t you pissed I’m railing at you like this?!”

“I’m not pissed at all. I’m glad you’re actually baring your heart to me.”

That was the honest truth. I’d set the table for this specifically. I wanted Miya to vent everything, and I wanted to hear it all. She’d never spilled her guts to me like this before. I’d suspected all along that she didn’t like me, but now I finally understood why she was so fixated on me.

“That attitude of yours is infuriating, too! Get mad! Fight back! When did you become such an adult?! You’re leaving me in the dust again!”

“I...”

I couldn’t find the right words to say. For better or for worse, she was right. I’d changed.

Parting ways with Miya, joining the Arrivers, meeting Roslia, surviving hell with Erin... and outliving Jin. All of that had led to me living a peaceful life in the capital, and then to my decision to start adventuring all over again.

Each meeting and parting had changed me little by little. We grow by interacting with other people, and that growth is something you can’t take back. I would never be my past self again.

The same applied to my relationship with Miya. It would never be exactly as it was before.

“I know it’s impossible...” Miya murmured. “You’re not the same Note you used to be, right? You’re not the same man you were with me.”

It seemed she’d sensed it too. We’d never be the same children we

were back in Changs.

“That’s right. So much has happened since then. I made so many memories... It’s a long story.”

Thus I began telling Miya everything that I’d been keeping from her. About everything that led to me joining the Arrivers, and everything that happened after.

“...So that’s your story, huh? You’ve sure been through a lot in the time we’ve been apart.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess that’s why you changed so much.”

“It would be more fair to say it all changed me.”

It was because Miya and I had split up that I’d become the man I was, even if the whole process hurt like hell. Without it, I simply wouldn’t be the same. That was why I had to tell her what I should’ve said two years earlier...

“You might resent me, but I’m grateful to you. Thanks for helping me get out of Changs, Miya. Thanks for sharing your dream with me. I was so lucky to have you as a childhood friend.”

“I can’t say the same.”

“How harsh...”

The old Miya never would’ve said that to me. She wouldn’t have said a word to hurt me. But rather than keeping everything superficial, it was a hundred times healthier to let our real feelings clash. As childhood friends.

“But if you’ve changed so much, Note... I wonder if that means I have too.”

“Just make sure you’re doing what you want to be doing.”

“You’re right. I think I’ve been too dependent on your dependence on me. Maybe that means I was really the one who needed you.”

That wasn’t Miya’s fault. I’d needed her first, and we’d allowed ourselves to create a closed environment where we were mutually codependent.

“But I’ve had enough of it! I don’t need you anymore, Note! I can live just fine on my own without you!”

That declaration hurt a little, but I was glad to hear it.

“So I hereby quit helping you with job requests! We’re rivals from now on! We’ll just see who becomes a top-tier adventurer first!”

“Sure, I’ll take you on. I don’t plan to lose, though.”

“That’s right! As a member of Note’s party, I consider that challenge issued to me too!” Roslia interjected after silently listening all this time.

“You two remember you’re still technically greenhorns, don’t you?” Miya retorted. “I’m gold rank, you know?”

“And? We’ve been further than anyone in the Dungeon of Puriff, you know?” Roslia quipped right back. “Our achievements are far superior to yours.”

“But you quit dungeon diving, right? Now that you’re adventurers in the capital, your rank is what really matters.”

“About that...” I said, ready to voice a decision I’d made some time ago. “I was thinking of challenging the dungeon again.”

“Really?” Roslia reacted first.

“When it comes down to it, I’ve never had more fun than I did with the Arrivers. Even if what we do is dangerous, even if we lose someone again... I want to keep trying. If the other Arrivers agree, I’d like to get back together.”

Jin wasn’t with us anymore, but I wanted to see our dream through.

“I don’t mind. I’d follow you anywhere,” offered Roslia.

“I was counting on you to say that,” I replied.

“You’re so mean! Always springing things on me, knowing I can’t refuse...”

“I’m sorry...”

There, Miya finally spoke up. She asked quietly, “You’re leaving the city?”

“Yeah. I didn’t hate it here, but Puriff suits me much better.”

“Is the dungeon that special?”

“You bet it is,” I answered with confidence. “I had the best time of my life there.”

“In that case, maybe I’ll try it too.”

“Huh?” I gawked, shocked by Miya’s sudden remark.

“If the dungeon’s as much fun as you say it is, then I’ll check it out for myself. With my skill set, that’s probably where I’ll have to go for a real challenge, right?”

That much was true. If Miya threw her hat in, she’d be a contender for top dungeoneer in no time. She had just that much potential.

“If I conquer the dungeon before you, then I win, right? We’ll be standing in the same ring, so it’s a good, fair fight. Like real rivals.”

“But what about the Raiders?”

“I don’t deserve to stay with them after lying to them all...”

Miya had lied about her skills and concealed her true strength. She’d betrayed the trust of her comrades. I had a feeling that if she confessed to Eldrich, he’d probably forgive her. But in the end, the choice was hers to make. If she couldn’t forgive herself, then leaving was a fair option.

“Anyways, I need to start over. I have to change for myself,” she continued. “I want a fresh start in a new place with new allies, as

selfish as that sounds.”

“What’s the problem? After everything you’ve been through, you can afford to be a little selfish.”

“I think I will, then.”

“By the way...” There was one last thing I had to ask Miya. “We have an open spot in our party. Do you want to join?”

“No way,” she replied with a smile. “If we’re doing it together, it wouldn’t be much of a contest.”

At long last, it felt like Miya and I were parting ways like we should. Not the twisted way we had years ago. We were finally moving toward our fated futures.

*

Once we’d made the decision to return to dungeon diving, things moved quickly. The first order of business was getting back to Puriff. It was a little sad to say goodbye to the city we’d lived in for half a year now, but my hopes for the future were greater.

Unfortunately, getting out of town wasn’t as simple as moving. I had plenty of people I needed to say goodbye to, so I’d set the day aside for that.

“Oh?! Well, if it isn’t Note! What are you doing here at noon? Late for work?” Hilton blustered.

“You know I quit already, right?” I replied.

My first stop was the courier company I used to work for. When I showed up at the office, Hilton, Monah, and the others were all on their lunch break.

“Of course I do! That was a joke!” Hilton continued.

“And what brings you here today?” Monah piped up. “You didn’t come empty-handed, did you?!”

“Here, here. I brought this for you,” I conceded, handing over the snacks I’d brought.

“Wow, he really gave us the goods... It was worth asking!”

“I would’ve given them to you either way.”

“So, really, what are you here for today?”

“I’m leaving the city, so I came to say goodbye.”

Hilton and the others had taken good care of me while I was working with them. Even though I’d already quit, I still wanted to express my gratitude.

“I see. Finally getting back to dungeoneering, huh?” Hilton guessed.

“Well, I need to find my friends first. It might be a while before we actually get back in the dungeon.”

“Boy, was I surprised when you told me you did that!” he laughed. I’d ended up telling everyone the truth when I quit for good.

"I thought you were pulling my leg..."

"I assumed it was just an excuse to quit," threw in Monah.

The whole office was in an uproar when I told them my story. That was just a few days ago, yet it was already like a fond memory.

"I had a feeling you were actually an amazing adventurer, Note. You impressed me when we took care of that purse snatcher."

"Wait, what?" Monah asked. "This is the first I've heard of this."

"Lots happened while we were out on delivery."

"Oh, Hilton's talking about that time he abandoned our packages."

"First I've heard of this too..."

"Don't say it like that, Note! I was trying to help an innocent old lady!"

Time flew by while we were chatting about this and that. Before I knew it, lunch break was over.

"Well, we'll see you later, Note! We've gotta get back to work," Monah said with an enthusiastic wave.

"Sorry for taking up your lunch."

"Don't mention it! It was fun talking to you again!"

"Thanks," I said, waving back.

"We'll be cheering for you," Hilton added, slapping me on the shoulder on his way out the door. "Make sure you clear that dungeon!"

"That's right! Once you become famous for conquering the dungeon, do some advertising for us!"

"You make it sound like it's going to be easy..." People didn't usually cheer on my dungeoneering to my face... I was kind of happy, and also kind of embarrassed. It was a strange feeling, but it wasn't bad. "Well, I suppose I can do a little promo if I make it that far."

"It's a promise!"

"If he's gonna be a celebrity in the future, should I get his signature now?"

"Okay, Hilton, you're getting a little ahead of yourself there."

I was blessed with good friends, even here at the delivery company. I was a little sorry that I'd had to quit.

*

"I've come to say goodbye, Hugel, Eisha."

After dropping by my old job, I headed straight for Hugel's place. He and Eisha had also been a huge help to me during my time in the capital. They were the real reason I'd gotten back into adventuring. They'd gotten me up to speed on my training, and without them, I may not have decided to face the dungeon again. I'd be eternally grateful for that.

"You're leaving already?"

“Time sure flies. It feels like we only met each other yesterday.”

But I had another reason for dropping by too. I’d asked Eisha for a special favor regarding the other Arrivers since she was the only intelligence operative I knew.

“How did it go?”

“The request was on such short notice that I didn’t have time to gather much, but here you go,” Eisha said, handing me a sheet of paper. “This is what I could find on the Arrivers’ current whereabouts.”

“Thank you for taking the time to compile this,” I said, skimming over the document.

“It was no trouble. I’m not working on any other requests at the moment,” Eisha added. “Oh, but there were a few blanks I couldn’t fill in...”

There, Eisha pointed to certain places in the document and explained them in detail. Despite her humble words, she’d collated an unbelievable amount of information. I’d only asked her to investigate a week ago, but she managed to gather all this in that short amount of time? How did she do it? I was curious, but too scared to ask.

“Everyone’s really all over the place now, huh?” I remarked.

“It’ll be a challenge gathering them again.”

“Well, I have a head start now thanks to your research. I’ll handle the rest from here.”

As Eisha had pointed out, there were several interesting gaps in the report. It wouldn’t be easy to track everyone down, but it was much more realistic now that I had something to go off of. A future where the Arrivers were back together again might be just around the corner.

“Sorry I couldn’t do anything for you.”

“It’s not really your area of expertise, so...”

Honestly, I hoped I’d never have to ask Hugel for his help. I’d probably be in real trouble if I were asking favors from a hitman.

“Show your face in the capital every now and then, you hear?”

“Yeah. I’ll try to visit once we’ve got the party organized again.”

“I’ll also drop by whenever I’m in Puriff.”

“Why don’t we go to Puriff together, Master Hugel? It can be our honeymoon—”

“Puriff doesn’t have many tourist spots other than the dungeon, though. Don’t you think it’s a bit dull for a vacation?”

“Yes, I completely agree!” Eisha yelled, teary-eyed over instantly being shot down.

Do your best, Eisha. I hope your feelings are requited the next we meet. I’ll pray for you.

“Well, take care of yourselves, you two.”

“You too, Note.”
“Good luck in the dungeon!”
I left them with a long wave.

*

“I guess it’s time to say goodbye to this city...”
“It’s a little sad.”

Roslia and I were currently at the carriage station on the west side of the capital waiting to depart. My bag was packed, and Roslia’s trunk looked heavy. Funnily enough, our luggage was just the same as it had been when we arrived, in spite of everything we’d bought since. I guess that meant we threw out as much as we gained.

“It felt like a long time, but we weren’t even here a year.”
“Right? It feels like it’s been ages since we’ve seen everyone.”
“That’s because we used to see each other every day.”

Our goal from here was to retrieve the other Arrivers and return to the town of Puriff where the dungeon was. The capital lay in the northeast of the country. In order to pick up everyone and end up in Puriff, we’d first be heading west. Once we made it far enough, around the midway point of Mignon, we’d leave the route to Puriff to head for the closest person based on Eisha’s info—probably Force.

“Here’s yours,” I said, handing Roslia her ticket.

From there, we handed our tickets over to the clerk and were then shown out to the carriage.

“It’s a little sad no one’s here to see us off,” Roslia lamented.

“Didn’t you say goodbye to everyone at the church already?” I asked.

“That’s not what I meant. I’m saying I wish Miya were here.”

“Ah, right,” I replied, finally catching on. “But of course she wouldn’t come. We’re rivals now.”

After our fight, our makeshift party with Miya was promptly dissolved. There was no drawn-out conversation about what happened or what we’d pent up over the years. We just walked back to the city like we always did after a job.

Before we parted, Miya said: “The next time we meet, I’ll be bragging about how I cleared the dungeon first! I won’t come see you until then!”

Undaunted, I’d replied: “Then I guess we’ll never see each other again since the Arrivers are going to clear it first.”

And that was that. We went our separate ways. I later overheard that she’d quit the Raiders when I dropped by the guild. I figured she was on her way to Puriff, but I didn’t know anything more.

“Even if you’re rivals, we were still adventuring buddies for a while! She could’ve at least come to say goodbye!”

“What, you miss her or something?”

“A little, yeah! She may not be obsessed with you anymore, but we could still be friends, you know?”

“Even though she said you were ‘some strange woman?’”

“And that hurt! It didn’t seem like my place to interject, so I didn’t say anything, but looking back on it, that was really rude! Does Miya actually hate me?!”

“You’d have to ask her.”

Based on what Miya had said while she was ranting, she certainly didn’t seem to have a favorable impression of Roslia when they first met... But perhaps that had changed over the course of working together.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll be able to see her whenever you want in Puriff. You can ask her then.”

“You want me to outright ask, ‘Do you hate me?’ She’ll totally get the wrong idea! You should ask for me, Note.”

“No way. If I go see her, I’ll be eating crow.”

“Huh, yeah. I guess it would be embarrassing to go see her over something so trivial after all that big talk...”

“Sure would. I’ll have to take care not to run into her in town.”

“You have to be extra careful when you go anywhere busy. Why don’t you get a mask or a disguise?”

“That’s going a little *too* far.”

While we were joking about such things, we arrived at the carriage. It was scheduled to depart in ten minutes. I’d wanted to arrive earlier, but our preparations had delayed us until the last possible minute.

I could see several silhouettes through the windows. Our fellow passengers, probably. It seemed we were the last to board. I was thinking that as I stepped up into the coach, and...

“...”

“...”

I silently, awkwardly made eye contact with the girl sitting in the back. Roslia, entering behind me, did the same.

“What? Did we really book the same carriage, Miya?” she asked.

“S-So it seems...” my childhood friend replied in a shaky voice.

I understood how she felt. After everything we’d said about “the next time we meet,” it was humiliating to bump into each other on the carriage. She looked away, but I could see that her ears were bright red.

“And so we meet again...” Roslia said.

“...What about it?” Miya replied.

“You conquered the dungeon yet?”

“...!”

Have some mercy, Roslia! She's about to cry! I know you want vengeance for that "some strange woman" comment, but any more and you're going to break her!

"Well, we're heading in the same direction... We just happened to end up in the same carriage by coincidence..."

"Why aren't you bragging to Note already?"

"Roslia, you should drop it—"

"I'm going home! Who cares about the dungeon?!" Miya yelled, leaping out of the carriage.

"See, Roslia? You shouldn't have..."

"Oops! Did I tease her too much?"

And so the chaos began... That was the one part of my old life I *hadn't* missed.



Afterword

It's been a while. Udon Kamono here.

Thank you for picking up volume 4 of *Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party*. Since I wrote a midword last time because of how the book and the page count worked out, this marks my first afterword in two volumes.

I actually agonized over the page count this time too... Before I started writing, I was worried that I might not make it to 200. Yet once I finished, I actually had over 300. What kind of mad calculations was I doing before I started writing?

Anyway, that's how I ended up coming up with this afterword two months in advance. I'm glad I got to write about exactly what I wanted, but now that I've done it, I realize I'm coming up short on content.

Thus I see the page count for the afterword is going to plague me as well... Never underestimate the matter of page numbers! This isn't good. I feel like I'll never get the hang of page count. I'm sure I'll be complaining about it in the next volume as well. I'll do my best to think of a better topic for the afterword...

Lastly, the acknowledgments. Shizuki, thank you for another round of magnificent, eye-catching illustrations. I spoke about how wonderful your art is at the thank-you party the other day, but I could go on about it forever. Editor Soyama, thank you for all your advice over the course of writing this volume as well. SAVAN, thank you for taking on the manga adaptation. All of the Arrivers are so charming. I'm so grateful.

Speaking of, volume 1 of the manga will hit the shelves around the time this volume does. If any of you are interested, please check it out.

And finally, to all my readers, thank you for supporting this series. I hope we meet again in the next volume.

-Udon Kamono

Roslia Minkgott

Nickname **Crusher**

Gear

Holy Sword Fractus

Party

Arrivers



Role

Paladin

Skills

Charm

Rarity: R (Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: Attracts living beings to oneself via the senses of sight and smell. More effective on members on the opposite sex.

Guide of the Holy Sword

Rarity: UR (Ultra Rare)

Slot Cost: 2

Effect: Summons the Holy Sword Fractus, a sacred blade that exemplifies the greatest sword technique.

Spells

Impenetrable Fortress

Defensive holy magic. Creates a wall of light to surround a fixed area.

Blades of Light

Offensive holy magic. Summons and fires projectiles of light.

Arts

Beacon

Aggro art. Attracts monsters with a pillar of light.



Udon Kamono

4

III. Hitomi Shizuki

Mapping:

The Trash-Tier Skill

✕ That Got Me Into a



Top-Tier Party





Bonus Short Stories

A Suffocating Love

One weekday afternoon...

“What do I have to do to get Master Hugel to see how I feel?” Eisha asked with a sigh as she rested her elbows on the table.

I was at Hugel’s place today to train. Hugel was out running an errand, however, which had left me and Eisha to train alone. We’d since wrapped up and were now having tea in the living room.

“How would I know?” I replied.

Honestly, I was the wrong person to ask. No way was she getting good advice from a younger guy with zero dating experience.

“I’m begging you, Note! Don’t forsake me!”

“It’s not like that. I’m just saying I don’t think I’m going to be any help.”

“If you help me out, I’ll do an investigation for you pro bono!”

“An investigation?”

“I’ll use my information gathering abilities to find out anything you want, be it what your girl looks for in a man, her measurements—anything!”

Eisha’s intelligence skills had Hugel’s personal seal of approval. They were so good that she’d pegged the Headhunter himself. An offer to use them for free was extremely tempting.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll hear you out.”

“Thank you, Note! So you want to know the measurements of the girl you love, huh?”

“Nope. Don’t go picking my investigation out yourself.”

There just so happened to be something that I needed investigated, so her offer couldn’t have come at a better time. I wanted to know just one thing—the whereabouts of the other Arrivers.

“You’re not interested in her measurements?!”

“Counterquestion: why *would* I be?”

Even if I had exact measurements, that kind of information wouldn’t do me any good. It only leads to thoughts like “Hmm, she’s surprisingly thick around the middle...” or “Huh, is she padding her bra to look bigger?” It’s pointless, I tell you.

“Don’t people normally want to know absolutely everything they can about the person they love?”

“Everything’ is kinda...”

“Their favorite foods, their least favorite foods, what time they wake up, what time they leave the house, what time they come back, what they wear at home, and so on!”

“Hold it.”

“Whether they take their clothes off starting from the top or the bottom, whether they bathe their head or their body first... Aren’t those all things you want to know?”

“Stop trying to get me to agree! What’s with you?! That’s terrifying!”

“Why do you sound so disgusted?!”

“Because I am! I should be asking why you’re *not!*”

“I thought it was completely normal...”

“Maybe for a stalker.”

Hugel really needed to watch out for himself. The woman he was living with had the disposition of a stalker in the making.

“Don’t tell me you’ve actually investigated everything you just mentioned.”

“H-Haha... Of course not.”

“Ah, so you have.”

Welp, it was too late for Eisha. She already *was* a stalker. But I guess that checked out—she’d gotten so good at this job in the process of tracking down the elusive Headhunter after falling for him.

Come to think of it, I’d been involved in a kerfuffle with a stalker somewhere before. Where was that again? It wasn’t that long ago...

“Oh, right, it was Hugel. I suspected he was a stalker too for a while...”

That was back in Puriff. When I’d found him skulking outside Arrivers’ HQ, I thought he was stalking Neme. I turned out to be wrong, however, as Hugel was really there to stake out Jin.

“Maybe you two and your creepy ways are actually perfect for each other...” I mumbled.

“Aw, really? You’re making me blush,” Eisha giddily replied.

“Yeah, uh... That wasn’t a compliment...”

I could only meet her blushing surprise with a cold stare.

Crusher vs. Receptionist

The day before we departed the capital, Roslia and I were packing our belongings.

“Did you finish saying your farewells to your old coworkers yesterday, Note?” she asked.

“Yeah. Why do you ask?”

“There’s one more person I’d like to say goodbye to.”

“I see. Is it someone I know? Or someone from the church?”

“I went to see everyone at the church yesterday. It is someone you know, though.”

“Who? The only acquaintances we have in common here are the people at the adventurers guild...” I trailed off, then gasped in realization. “Is it Eldrich?”

“Close, but no. I mean the receptionist.”

“Oh.”

With those few words, I understood completely. She was talking about the woman we’d dealt with the first time we went to the guild. She and Roslia had bickered every time we’d been back since.

“But, like, aren’t you two on bad terms?”

“We are. I’ve caused her lots of trouble, so I’d like to make amends before we part ways for good.”

“That’s a nice way of thinking about it.”

It seemed like Roslia had reflected on her actions. I was a little touched. As someone who’d witnessed all her troublemaking firsthand, I readily agreed to accompany her for the final apologetic farewell.

“Good day to you, Miss Receptionist!”

“Ugh.”

As soon as we arrived at the guild, Roslia sidled up to the reception counter with a grin. The receptionist grimaced in return.

“What’s with the attitude? We’re customers, you know?”

“Watch it, Roslia. Why are you trying to kick things off by picking a fight?” I smacked her on the back of the head. I wanted a refund on my sympathy from earlier. “Did you forget why we’re here?”

“Oh, right. Old habits die hard. She just has a face that makes me want to mess with her.”

“For your information, that’s another insult.”

I was already beginning to regret bringing Roslia here.

“So, what can I do for you today?” the receptionist asked, her face twitching.

“I come bearing both good and bad news,” Roslia replied.

“Um... If this isn’t about a job, can you just go away?”

“Now, don’t be so cold. We’re such good friends, after all.”

“We’re just a guild employee and an adventurer... If you’re not taking a job request, please leave. You’re getting in the way of my work.”

“We’ll be out of your hair as soon as you hear us out—both the good news and the bad.”

“If you’re here, it’s already bad news for me,” the receptionist replied with a heavy sigh. “Start with the good news, then.”

“We’ll be leaving the capital tomorrow.”

“ALL RIGHT!” the receptionist hollered with a dramatic fist pump.

“Yes! YES! Finally! I’m free!”

“Uh, aren’t you a little *too* excited about that?”

“I’m sorry. I lost control a bit there.”

“That was a whole lot more than ‘a bit,’ you know?” Roslia muttered, fed up.

Granted, considering how Roslia had tormented her all this time, the receptionist’s excitement was understandable.

“All right, out with the bad news then. I’m sure I’ll be able to handle whatever it is with a smile now,” the receptionist said, still beaming brightly with her fists clenched triumphantly.

“We’ll be leaving the capital tomorrow.”

“You said that already.”

“In other words, we’ll no longer be coming by the guild...”

“Yes. But that was the good news, no?”

“It’s basically the same as us getting banned from the guild.”

“Huh?”

“Which means that even if we *do* get banned, it won’t make a difference.”

“What are you getting at?” the receptionist asked, the smile wilting on her face.

Roslia continued without care or concern, “What I’m saying is that I can do whatever I’d like today—everything I’ve always wanted to and held back!”

“Please, just leave quietly!” the receptionist yelled with tears in her eyes.

Yeah, I’ll make sure to reign Roslia in...

What If: Note, Alone

A year had passed since I’d come to the capital alone. The day I’d left the Arrivers, Roslia had tried to stop me, but I shook her off and fled. In my depression, I chose to be alone even at the cost of hurting her.

I then boarded a carriage and headed northeast, as far from Puriff as it would take me. I eventually arrived at the capital, which was coincidentally somewhere I’d always wanted to visit. With no one to rely on, I wandered despondently through the city until—by another coincidence—I ran into someone I used to know.

“Is... Is that you, Note?”

Her voice brought nostalgic tears to my eyes. I couldn’t just ignore her calling out to me... I was too weak for that. Even though I had no right to talk to her given how shamelessly I’d behaved in the past, I

answered her. She then asked me...

"Are you okay? You look really upset."

And at that, I confessed everything. I told her about what had happened after we'd parted ways. What had happened when I'd joined the Arrivers. And everything that had transpired after.

Then I apologized for the terrible way I'd treated her. My belated regrets all came spewing out. I wasn't expecting absolution. I wouldn't have blamed her if she'd held it all against me. And yet... she accepted my words with a kind smile. To my utter shock, she forgave me.

Oh, how could anyone be so kind? She was the only one for me, I finally realized. I'd taken a long detour to arrive at that conclusion, but at the end of the day, I needed Miya. I couldn't live without her.

And after that, we began reliving our childhood dream of becoming adventures together. Once again, I was completely dependent on her.

"Another mission accomplished!" Miya cheered triumphantly after shooting down an avian monster the size of a horse.

I'd seen the same thing a hundred times before, but I praised her earnestly: "Wow, Miya. You really are amazing."

"I know, right?" she replied, jokingly sticking her chest out in a proud display. She then scratched her cheek and added, "But I was only able to handle that so easily because you drew the monster's attention."

"That's not true. Even if I weren't here, you would've taken it down with ease."

She always tried to make me feel better, but I was no match for her adventuring prowess. She could detect monsters and draw aggro all on her own. She was just that incredible. It was no exaggeration to say she had it all.

In contrast, I hadn't improved one bit since my days with the Arrivers. If anything, I was weaker than I used to be. Now that I was out of the dungeon, I knew no danger. I lived my life as a surface adventurer under Miya's full protection.

It was obvious that I was getting more and more complacent. But Miya praised me for it. She spoiled me rotten. Her words were always so comforting that, somewhere along the line, I'd stopped even trying. But who cared? Things were easier this way. Nothing was ever painful. I just told myself that my happiness in the moment was all that mattered.

"You probably don't need me here, Miya."

"That's not true."

She was so kind that she'd deny the truth out of politeness.

"But I need you, Miya. I'm worthless without you."

“What’s up with you today, Note?” she giggled, brushing off my words.

She truly seemed happy right now. Her smile was so bright, it almost seemed as if she’d been waiting for me to say that. Why was she so delighted? I felt a little uneasy, but ultimately decided not to think about it.

There was no point in suspecting anything. I needed Miya, plain and simple. The moment she betrayed me, that would be it for me. So there was no reason to think about what would happen then.

“Please don’t ever abandon me, Miya.”

“As if! I’d never do that, Note.”

We’d lived side by side since we were children, and that was the biggest smile I’d seen on her face in over fifteen years.

What If: Erin’s Route

A year had passed since Erin and I left the Arrivers together. After being stranded on floor 20 for two long months, we’d finally made our way back to Puriff alive. The ordeal, however, had permanently scarred Erin.

“I’m thinking of quitting dungeon diving,” she’d told me at the time. “It wouldn’t be so bad to live a normal, happy life with you, away from all the monsters and danger. We could even get married eventually...”

I knew she had a point. If we continued dungeon diving, either one of us or someone else would wind up dead. Instead of walking that path, living out a peaceful life with Erin was easily the better choice. It would be too late to take it back once something happened.

There’s no retrieving what’s lost forever.

And so I chose to quit dungeon diving in favor of pursuing a life with Erin. That was how the two of us became lovers.

“I’m back!” a friendly voice called from the door.

Sounds like Erin’s here.

“Welcome home. You’re sure late tonight,” I called back.

“I got absorbed in my work and ended up staying overtime. I’ll make dinner now, so just give me a bit,” she said as she appeared in the living room. She then took off her socks and headed straight for the kitchen.

“Sorry. Should I have made something instead?”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. It tastes better when I cook, anyway.”

“That’s true...”

“I’m not saying your cooking is bad! It’s just that I have a skill and all,” Erin denied in a fluster. “I want to cook delicious food for you, so

I'm really just being selfish here. Don't mind me."

I'd always wanted to live in the city, so Erin and I had migrated to the capital. It had now been a whole year since we'd moved into a modestly sized one-bedroom home and started living together. Although we bickered a lot at first, we'd since settled into a calm routine like some elderly couple. At this rate, we would probably end up getting married.

"Maybe I'll make something with that nice meat I bought the other day."

"You mean that ludicrously expensive stuff?"

"Yup. So you have that to look forward to."

I watched as Erin took the ingredients for dinner out of the fridge.

"It's so luxurious that I'm not even sure I'll be able to fully appreciate the taste... You could've gotten something cheaper, you know?"

"With the money I make, this was a drop in the bucket."

Erin was currently working in magical device production. She'd been a complete amateur on the subject when we'd first moved to the capital, but her skill set and natural talents allowed her to pick it up virtually overnight. She'd only been studying it for a year, but she was already the number two at her company. She earned a salary ten times mine. It was actually kind of upsetting.

"Why am I even working again...?" I muttered.

"Honestly, I don't know. You should just quit," she replied.

"I didn't think you would actually agree with me..."

My upset gauge instantly went through the roof. When she saw my shoulders slump, Erin began frantically waving her hands.

"It's not like that! I'm just saying you don't *have* to work. I'll take care of you."

"You mean I can live off of your income?"

"Yeah. I've got money to burn, so spend it however you'd like. You can just relax at home."

"Erin, do you know what that's called?"

"What?"

"Being a mooch."

I wasn't expecting her to offer me a free ride as a total sponger. What kind of dirtbag leaves the breadwinning to his girlfriend while he lazes around the house? I mean, without even cooking for her? I'd never let myself fall that low.

"Why not? I'm sure I'd love you just the same if you were Note Athlon the mooch."

"As your boyfriend, I'm officially worried about your sanity..."

Wasn't she spoiling me too much? If Erin was going to be like this, I really had to get my act together. That was my takeaway from our

conversation.

What If: Roslia's Route

A year had passed since Roslia and I gave up on adventuring together. Toward the end of our first winter in the capital, I'd made her cry. I'd lied to her and wounded her deeply, all out of my selfish desire to start adventuring again. Was my dream really worth hurting the one person who'd stood by my side through everything? No, any dream that comes at the cost of your loved ones has to be a mistake. Especially if it means sacrificing the person most precious to you.

And so I made two decisions that day. The first was to give up on adventuring for good. Roslia had stuck with me through thick and thin without one word of complaint, and it was high time I returned the favor. It was my turn to put her first. I was prepared to abandon my dream for her sake. As for the other decision...

"It's already been a year since we started dating. Time really flies, huh, Note?"

"In truth, it feels like we've been dating for way longer than that. We went on an awful lot of casual dates before we really started dating."

"That's true," Roslia replied from where she lay splayed on the carpet.

After a year of dating, she'd changed quite a bit. In the beginning, she'd coyly acted like the ideal lover any man would want... but not anymore. Maybe it'd happened about the time we moved in together? She gradually began behaving more and more like a lazy, spoiled child.

I stood up to take my plate to the kitchen—and Roslia's too, of course.

"Thank you, Note."

"Sure."

"I love you," she said, hugging my legs.

"Thanks, but I can't exactly do the dishes like this..."

"You don't have to be so shy."

"I'm not being shy. Just save the playing around for when I'm done cleaning up."

"Fine..."

Roslia released her hold on my legs. The way she was lying on the floor with her butt stuck up in the air made her look like a caterpillar.

"My image of you is slowly but surely being destroyed..."

"What are you on about?"

"You wouldn't have been caught dead doing this with the

Arrivers.”

“Yeah, but we weren’t dating back then.”

“How did dating turn into *this*?”

“It’s a sign of how comfortable I am around you now. You should be flattered, you know.”

“I feel more like I’m being tricked...”

“What an awful thing to say... hic...”

Roslia pretended to cry. I rinsed the plates in the sink, then returned to sit beside her and pat her head.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re so nice to me, Note, which is exactly why I’m getting more and more spoiled.”

“It’s because you’re so cute. I can’t help it.”

“There you go again.” Roslia closed her eyes, basking in the bliss of head pats. “It’s like our positions have been reversed. I used to be the one letting you sleep in my lap.”

“That’s true. It’s a sign of how much I’ve come to love you.”

“You love me, Note? Hearing you say it directly like that makes me happy.”

“Really? Then I’ll say it as many times as you want.”

“Thank you. I love you too, Note.”

“Thanks,” I replied, running my fingers through her indigo hair.

A moment of comfortable silence passed between us. Roslia then suddenly looked up into my eyes.

“Say, Note, are you happy right now?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“Just wondering.”

I tried to imagine my life if I hadn’t started dating Roslia. Surely I would’ve gotten back into adventuring. What would she have done? Would she have followed me?

Life as an adventurer would have been full of thrills. I would have experienced all kinds of new things and personal growth. Every day would have been incredible, but I didn’t think I’d be any happier than I was now. No, surely nothing was better than making memories with Roslia like this. I could say that much with proud certainty.

“Of course. I’m really happy, Roslia.”

“I’m glad. I’m happy as well.”

“Then I’m glad too.”

If dreams are what you achieve by forsaking your chance at an ordinary life, then happiness is what you get by embracing it.



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